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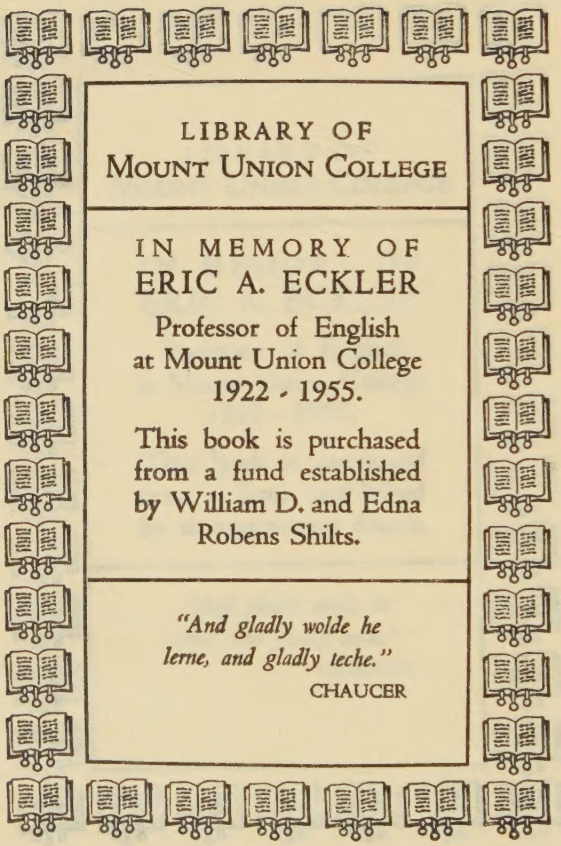

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lerne, and gladly teche."
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PHASES OF ENGLISH POETRY

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A COAT OF MANY COLOURS
WORDSWORTH
COLERIDGE AS CRITIC

PHASES OF ENGLISH POETRY

by

HERBERT READ

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PREFACE

Phases of English Poetry is an all-embracing title which needs some definition by way of preface. The most drastic delimitation, for the author, is determined by his point of view, which is not so much that of the historical student as that of the modern poet. Poetry for him, especially English poetry, is a living reality; if it is not living it is not poetry. He applies to his own literature a distinction that Paul Bourget made in one of his books of criticism[1] —the distinction between literature which is *actual* and literature which is *historical*. This distinction implies that for the existing state of affairs (or the existing state of consciousness) certain authors have no immediacy, no impelling influence, no sympathetic power. We can learn from them, but we cannot be inspired by them. To such authors, therefore, I have given scant attention. I have treated as poets only those whose poetry has for me the air of present reality.

There is one further limitation to this survey, and this time an arbitrary one. I have not attempted to include in its scope the figure of Shakespeare. In a sense, Shakespeare *is* English poetry. He represents its essence, a fact which perhaps sufficiently emerges in the seventh chapter. But to define that essence, to seize it and isolate it and subject it to cold analysis—that is neither within my power nor part of my present intention.

H. R.

3*rd July*, 1928.

The first edition of this book appeared twenty years ago (Hogarth Press, 1928) and was then written as one of a series of volumes by various hands that had the special aim of addressing in an easy manner what the educationists call

[1] *Quelques Témoignages* (Librairie Plon, 1928).

'an extra-mural audience.' My particular design was initiative rather than critical. In this revised edition I have not departed from the manner, but I have increased the scope of my essay. I have added two completely new chapters (the third and fourth), but otherwise my alterations have been merely such as the passage of time made desirable.

H. R.

1 *September*, 1948

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1

THE BEGINNINGS OF POETRY

During its history of eight hundred years or so English poetry has assumed a multitude of forms. As these forms evolved, they received a classification into rough-and-ready categories like the Ballad, the Epic, the Ode, the Lyric, the Sonnet, the Narrative Poem, the Dramatic Poem, and so on. Most of these categories are very comfortable and capacious pigeon-holes, and no doubt by division and redivision it would be possible to make them neater. But I think it would be rather a sterile occupation, satisfying a pragmatic How, but leaving unanswered the more metaphysical Why. The kind of inquiry I have in mind will be mainly concerned with the Why of things. We want to know *why* poetry has assumed all these different shapes and sizes, and *why* one particular shape and size is characteristic of one particular age. And analysing beyond mere shapes and sizes, we want to ask why at one time poets have been interested in one particular aspect of life and not in others; and why in one age they have been poets with their whole nature, and in other ages poets of a select and recondite sensibility.

This is essentially, therefore, an inquiry into the evolution of poetry, but I confine myself to English poetry, firstly, because I think it is the only poetry which I, as an Englishman, can completely feel and understand; and then because English poetry, as a living and developing organism, is my greatest interest, and therefore claims all my space in a short argument like this. My general thesis will be, that poetry has developed from the widest possible appeal—an appeal commensurate with the community itself—to the narrowest possible appeal—the poet appealing to himself alone. A circle has been completed—completed only within the last generation or two. But the complete circle is a very forbidding metaphor. What exactly does it imply? It might

imply that no further development is possible; that poetry has reduced itself to a condition of stalemate. I shall not resort to Goethe's subterfuge of a spiral; rather I shall suggest that extremes meet—that the most significant types of modern poetry have elements in common with the earliest poetry, and if a metaphor or image of our present condition is wanted, we shall find it in one of the most representative of modern poems:[1]

> Here we go round the prickly pear,
> Prickly pear prickly pear
> Here we go round the prickly pear
> At five o'clock in the morning.

We must begin our examination of English poetry at a point far removed from its actual origins. In Anglo-Saxon poetry we find certain formal characteristics which were to become a part of the native tradition; but even Anglo-Saxon poetry is already a highly developed art-form. For direct poetic evidence—that is to say, poetry which still has a direct appeal to the common reader—we cannot go beyond Chaucer; and Chaucer represents a very high level of culture—a level which has not been surpassed very obviously by any poet since Chaucer. But, luckily, there is one body of material which, though not necessarily prior in the historical sense, does in the genetic sense, the only sense that matters for our purpose, offer reliable analogies to primitive poetry. It is sufficient, at any rate, to provide us with a starting-point. I mean the traditional ballad.[2]

[1] 'The Hollow Men', by T. S. Eliot (*Collected Poems*, Faber & Faber, 1936).

[2] 'The ballads are not merely a limb of the great mediaeval body of romance; they are a separate form. They are not mere versified folklore, because their form—the *Idea* of a *Ballad*—makes them reject some of the most delightful fairy tales as unfit for their poetical scope. They are not degradations of longer stories, for even when they have the same plot, they make a different thing of it.'—W. P. Ker 'On the History of the Ballads, 1100–1500' (*Proc. Brit. Acad.*, vol. iv).

THE BEGINNINGS OF POETRY

The beginning of this study belongs to anthropology, and the anthropologist has many interesting things to say about the origins of poetry. By poetry he means rhythmic song, for rhythm is the only scientific test he can apply. Let us, for the moment, be content with this criterion. What, then, is the theory of the origins of poetry offered to us by the anthropologist?

There are, unfortunately, too many theories, but I think we can reduce them to a certain orthodoxy. We go right back to the origin of speech. There the philologists, replacing for a moment the anthropologists, ask us to consider primitive language as consisting chiefly of very long words, full of difficult sounds, and sung rather than spoken.[1] The separation into single words and the development of a syntax come later. It is not suggested that the instinctive cry of an animal is speech; language is not merely a reaction to environment. At least two further very complex factors are involved, selfconsciousness and objectivity. Language is a *conscious* use of vocal sounds, and the vocal sounds are differentiated and attached to particular objects. We may, if we like, regard these as one process—as the growing awareness of a division between subjective and objective. As this process developed the parts of speech came into being, and henceforth language is not only expression, but also communication.

At this stage poetry became possible. The most primitive vocal noise, once it was identified with a particular object or emotion, and once its meaning or symbolic association was shared by a whole community, this noise could be beaten into rhythm. The tribal march, the beating of drums, these induce the accompaniment of a cry—of victory, of woe, or of lust. What Professor Gummere,[2] in an excellent phrase, calls 'the cadence of consenting feet'—this cadence is the first cause of poetry (anthropologists' poetry, let it be all the time understood). It is naturally a regular cadence;

[1] O. Jespersen, *Language*, p. 421.

[2] Francis B. Gummere, *The Beginnings of Poetry* (New York, 1901).

the 'feet' of the savages become the feet of a dissyllabic metre. (It would seem to follow that the classicist in his purity is merely giving expression to an unconscious atavism.)

The important point to note in this hypothesis is the assumption of a communal origin of poetry. Poetry existed before the poet. It could not exist without that 'cadence of consenting feet'—was but a chorus or vocal music accompanying that cadence. It seems to me that the next step may have had some connection with the rise and development of instrumental music; as the music developed it would call for more complicated and sustained vocal accompaniments. These in their turn would encourage feats of memory or invention. But the same result would be attained by the differentiation of talents within the community; that is to say, the man would arise to whom song would be a natural talent, or even a supernatural function. 'At a very early stage the differentiation must have established itself between the leader of retentive memory and nimble resource who sets the strain, and the throng who listen and beat time until the recurring moments when they get the signal to strike in with some rehearsed or familiar burden. And as functions are distinguished and the original homogeneity of the folk begins to break up, it is from the song-leader that the minstrel, and after the minstrel the *trouvère*, takes his starting-point and establishes himself as the recognised exponent of the old songs and the recognised "maker" of the new. Obviously during this process the dependence of poetry upon the throng gradually disappears.'[1] That, I think, expresses the probable course of evolution very clearly. It takes us, however, beyond the limits of the present chapter. I want to consider a little more fully this phenomenon which we call folk-song.

In a passage of uncertain meaning in the *Poetics*, Aristotle suggests that the earliest kind of poetry was developed by

[1] 'Some Aspects of Mediaeval Lyric', by E. K. Chambers. *Early English Lyrics*, chosen by E. K. Chambers and F. Sidgwick (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1926, p. 260).

slow stages out of improvisations.[1] A controversy has raged for more than a century as to whether such improvisations spring spontaneously out of the community, or are actually the improvisations of a single individual taken up by the community. The first hypothesis is not so impossible as at first sight would appear; Mr Robert Graves has drawn attention[2] to the way in which during the First World War marching songs and chanties were improvised to the tunes of well-known music-hall songs. These songs existed in many variants—every division, probably, had its version of 'I Want to go Home', with topical references to the experiences of the unit. There was no single author concerned; the song grew up from many vague suggestions, and even (this is instructive when considering the ballads) from misunderstandings or mishearings of the words of the song. This phenomenon of the apparently spontaneous generation of a song is also a familiar experience in other close communities —such as public schools, mining camps, and ships.

The opposing theory is, that in all such cases there is one individual responsible for the invention of the words of the song, and that the song merely spreads from him to the community. Once it becomes popular it may be improved or added to by suggestions from various other individuals in the community, but at every stage the creative impulse is individual.

It is not really necessary to take sides in this controversy, because, like most controversies, it arises from a false perspective on both sides. For the significant thing about all folk-songs is, not how or by whom they were composed, but

[1] 'Imitation, then, being natural to us—as also the sense of harmony and rhythm, the metres being obviously species of rhythms—it was through their original aptitude, and by a series of improvements for the most part gradual on their first efforts, that they created poetry out of their improvisations.'—*Works*, vol. xi, 1448, b. 20 (trans. Ingram Bywater. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924).

[2] *The English Ballad* (London: Benn, 1927).

that they appealed to and were adopted by the community, and once adopted, that they were handed down from generation to generation and from century to century. The really interesting question is: What are the elements in the folk-songs that determine their survival? What, in other words, are their invariable characteristics?

We must now consider some actual examples. The best of the ballads, like *Childe Waters* or *The Battle of Otterburn*, are too long to quote in their entirety, and in any case it is difficult to select one particular ballad to represent all the characteristics of ballad literature. *Hugh of Lincoln*, or *The Jew's Daughter*, will serve for a good many of them.

Four and twenty bonny boys
  Were playing at the ba',
And by it came him sweet Sir Hugh,
  And he played o'er them a'.

He kicked the ba' with his right foot,
  And catch'd it wi' his knee,
And throuch-and-thro the Jew's window
  He gar'd the bonny ba' flee.

He's doen him to the Jew's castell,
  And walk'd it round about;
And there he saw the Jew's daughter,
  At the window looking out.

'Throw down the ba', ye Jew's daughter,
  Throw down the ba' to me!'
'Never a bit,' says the Jew's daughter,
  'Till up to me come ye.'

'How will I come up? How can I come up?
  How can I come to thee?
For as ye did to my auld father,
  The same ye'll do to me.'

She's gane till her father's garden,
  And pu'd an apple red and green;

'Twas a' to wyle him sweet Sir Hugh,
And to entice him in.

She's led him in through ae dark door,
And sae has she thro nine;
She's laid him on a dressing-table
And stickit him like a swine.

And first came out the thick, thick blood,
And syne came out the thin,
And syne came out the bonny heart's blood;
There was nae mair within.

She's row'd him in a cake of lead,
Bade him lie still and sleep;
She's thrown him in Our Lady's draw-well,
Was fifty fathom deep.

When bells were rung, and mass was sung,
And a' the bairns came hame,
When every lady gat hame her son,
The Lady Maisry gat nane.

She's taen her mantle her about,
Her coffer by the hand,
And she's gane out to seek her son,
And wander'd o'er the land.

She's doen her to the Jew's castell,
Where a' were fast asleep:
'Gin ye be there, my sweet Sir Hugh,
I pray you to me speak.'

She's doen her to the Jew's garden,
Thought he had been gathering fruit:
'Gin ye be there, my sweet Sir Hugh,
I pray you to me speak.'

She near'd Our Lady's deep draw-well,
Was fifty fathom deep:
'Whare'er ye be, my sweet Sir Hugh,
I pray you to me speak.'

'Gae hame, gae hame, my mither dear,
Prepare my winding sheet.
And at the back o' merry Lincoln
The morn I will you meet.'

Now Lady Maisry is gane hame,
Made him a winding sheet,
And at the back o' merry Lincoln
The dead corpse did her meet.

And a' the bells o' merry Lincoln
Without men's hands were rung,
And a' the books o' merry Lincoln
Were read without man's tongue,
And ne'er was such a burial
Sin Adam's days begun.

The legend on which this ballad is based goes back to the thirteenth century, though the first written record of it is as recent as the middle of the eighteenth century. But these facts matter little; *Hugh of Lincoln* is a true ballad in so much as it is anonymous and has been handed down for centuries as an oral tradition. The characteristics which it typifies are these: First, a clean directness of narrative. No time is lost on details which serve no purpose in forwarding the action; there is no comment, no criticism, no probing into motives. There are certain repetitions (we are twice told, for example, that Our Lady's well 'was fifty fathom deep'), but these are probably survivals of the refrain—a feature of early poetry to which I shall refer in a moment. It is only necessary to note here that to repeat a phrase for effect is not the same thing as an aimless expatiation.

Secondly, we cannot help noting a certain fierce realism. A squeamish age will balk at this, and call it callous. It is, of course, nothing of the sort. If you want to be callous you should be pathological; you should work on the nerves of the reader. But slick slaughter-house butchery, such as delights children in the tale of 'Jack the Giant Killer' or 'Bluebeard',

has the effect of fantasy. It may thrill, but it does not sicken or excruciate. But this realism is not confined to the bloody happenings in these ballads:

> He kicked the ba' with his right foot,
> And catch'd it wi' his knee,

is every bit as realistic as:

> She's laid him on a dressing-table
> And stickit him like a swine.

What, inheriting the jargon of our fathers, we call realism is no more than definiteness. To the directness of the narrative (that is, of the action) corresponds the definiteness of the visualisation (that is, of the details). Definiteness is a most striking characteristic of the ballads; note, for example, that the Jew's daughter led Sir Hugh through, not several, but *nine* doors. And there were *four and twenty* bonny boys playing ball, and the well was *fifty* fathom deep. All effective fantasy is marked by extreme definiteness.

Another characteristic of most of the ballads is well illustrated by *Hugh of Lincoln*; I mean the introduction of a supernatural element. The rendezvous made by the dead corpse, the mysterious ringing of the bells, the still more mysterious reading of the books—these are characteristics not merely of the ballads, but of the people who produced them. Remember that the ballads are almost all of northern origin, for in that fact lies the explanation of their character and form.

There are several other features of ballad poetry not illustrated by *Hugh of Lincoln*: there is deep complaint of unhappy, tragic love, the motive of so many of the ballads, which finds expression of an extraordinary purity in *The Unquiet Grave*:

> 'The wind doth blow to-day, my love,
> And a few small drops of rain;
> I never had but one true-love;
> In cold grave she was lain.

'I'll do as much for my true-love
As any young man may;
I'll sit and mourn all at her grave
For a twelvemonth and a day.'

The twelvemonth and a day being up,
The dead began to speak:
'Oh who sits weeping on my grave,
And will not let me sleep?'—

''Tis I, my love, sits on your grave,
And will not let you sleep;
For I crave one kiss of your clay-cold lips,
And that is all I seek.'—

'You crave one kiss of my clay-cold lips;
But my breath smells earthy strong;
If you have one kiss of my clay-cold lips
Your time will not be long.'

''Tis down in yonder garden green,
Love, where we used to walk,
The finest flower that e'er was seen
Is wither'd to a stalk.

'The stalk is wither'd dry, my love,
So will our hearts decay;
So make yourself content, my love,
Till God calls you away.'

The perfection of this particular folk-song is a little marred by the sententiousness of the last verse, and we should note rather suspiciously that the words were not taken down until 1868. The end of *Clerk Saunders* is more convincing:

'Is there ony room at your head, Saunders?
Is there ony room at your feet?
Or ony room at your side, Saunders,
Where fain, fain I wad sleep?'

'There's nae room at my head, Marg'ret,
There's nae room at my feet;
My bed is fu' lowly now,
Amang the hungry worms I sleep.

'Cauld mould is my covering now,
But and my winding-sheet;
The dew it falls no sooner down
Than my resting-place is weet.

'But plait a wand o' bonny birk
And lay it on my breast;
And shed a tear upon my grave,
And wish my saul gude rest.'

Then up and crew the red, red cock,
And up and crew the gray:
''Tis time, 'tis time, my dear Marg'ret,
That you were going away.

'And fair Marg'ret, and rare Marg'ret,
And Marg'ret o' veritie,
Gin e'er ye love another man,
Ne'er love him as ye did me.'

There still remain one or two characteristics of ballad poetry or folk-song which are not fully illustrated by the examples already quoted. There is, for instance, the device of repetition or refrain, which is a very curious and effective feature of early poetry. Originally it may have been a chorus or chanty sung by the audience to the 'solo' of the bard or *trouvère*, just as the chorus is taken up by the audience in the modern music-hall. But as the ballad evolved, this chorus took on a poetic function of its own; it became a more or less meaningless formula whose function was almost entirely abstract. It became a musical incantation, a series of syllables or symbols whose effect was to hypnotise or enthral the audience who repeated it, or perhaps merely to lull them into a state of enhanced sensibility, or even of no

sensibility at all. Many of these refrains have become quite meaningless, such as, 'Hey go bet, hey go bet, hey go howe,' 'Hey, nonny, nonny,' 'Terly, terlow'; or divorced from any rational context, like 'Follow, my love, come over the strand', in *The Fair Flower of Northumberland*, and 'Sing Annet, and Marret, and fair Maisrie, as the dew hangs i' the wood, gay ladie!' in *The Cruel Brother*.

But the ordinary traditional use of the refrain is well illustrated in the *Cleveland Lyke Wake Dirge*, a watch-song sung over dead bodies which continued in use in North Yorkshire until as late as 1800:

This ae nighte, this ae nighte,
—Every nighte and alle,
Fire and sleet and candle-lighte;
And Christe receive thy saule.

When thou from hence away art past,
—Every nighte and alle,
To Whinny-muir thou com'st at last;
And Christe receive thy saule.

If ever thou gavest hosen and shoon,
—Every nighte and all,
Sit thee down and put them on;
And Christe receive thy saule.

If hosen and shoon thou ne'er gav'st nane,
—Every nighte and alle,
The whinnes shall pick thee to the bare bane;
And Christe receive thy saule.

From Whinny-muir when thou may'st pass,
—Every nighte and alle,
To Brig o' Dread thou com'st at last;
And Christe receive thy saule.

If ever thou gave of thy silver and gold,
—Every nighte and alle,
At Brig o' Dread thou'lt find foothold;
And Christe receive thy saule.

If silver and gold thou ne'er gav'st nane,
—Every nighte and alle,
Thou'lt tumble down towards Hell's flame;
And Christe receive thy saule.

From Brig o' Dread when thou mayst pass,
—Every nighte and alle,
To Purgatory fire thou com'st at last,
And Christe receive thy saule.

If ever thou gavest meat or drink,
—Every nighte and alle,
The fire shall never make thee shrink;
And Christe receive thy saule.

If meat or drink thou ne'er gavest nane,
—Every nighte and alle,
The fire will burn thee to the bare bane;
And Christe receive thy saule.

This ae nighte, this ae nighte,
—Every nighte and alle,
Fire and sleet and candle-lighte,
And Christe receive thy saule.

To get the full effect of this dirge, one must take into account not only the scene, which is eerie enough, but also the beautiful and mournful dialect in which it used to be sung. This ballad brings out well the basis of superstitious dread common to so much Northern folk-poetry, and the repeated refrain works up this dread by gradual stages to a climax.

Closely allied to the dread of the world-to-come is a despair of the transitory life on earth. The early poetry of the North, and particularly the Anglo-Saxon and Early English poetry out of which the main stream of our native poetry springs, is throughout deeply pessimistic. If it escapes from this mournful mood, it is only to the solace of religion. It does not seem, at least in these early days, that the mood of pessimism was induced by Christianity; the carols and poems

which celebrate Christ's nativity are cheerful interludes in the general despondency, though no doubt in the doctrine of original sin Christianity had given the inherent pessimism of the northern races a motive or symbol, round which they could weave their gloomiest fancies. There is no more striking evidence of the prevalence of this despondency than that Anglo-Irish cradle-song with which I must bring the illustrations to this chapter to an end; if the infant in its cradle must listen to such disenchanted (and enchanting!) strains, there can be little left of joy in manhood's estate:

Lollai, lollai, litil child!
Whi wepistou so sore?
Nedis mostou wepe,
Hit was iyarkid * the yore
Ever to lib in sorow,
And sich and mourne evere,
As thin eldren did er this,
Whil hi alives were.

Lollai, lollai, litil child,
Child, lolai, lullow!
Into uncuth world
Incommen so ertow. †

Bestis and thos foules,
The fisses in the flode,
And euch schef ‡ alives
Makid of bone and blode,
Whan hi commith to the world
Hi doth ham silf sum gode,
Al bot the wrech brol §
That is of Adamis blode.

Lollai, lollai, litil child!
To kar ertow bemette;
Thou nost noght this worldis wild
Bifor the is isette.

* Prepared, ordained. † Art thou.
‡ Creature. § Child.

Child, if it betideth
That thou ssalt thrive and the, *
Thench thou wer ifostred
Up thi moder kne;
Ever hab mund† in thi hert
Of those thinges thre,
Whan thou commist, whan thou art,
And what ssal com of the.

Lollai, lollai, litil child,
Child, lollai, lolai!
With sorow thou com into this world,
With sorow ssalt wend awai.

Ne tristou to this world;
Hit is thi ful fo.
The rich he makith pouer,
The pore rich also.
Hit turneth wo to wel,
And eke wel to wo.
Ne trist no man to this world,
Whil hit turnith so.

Lollai, lollai, litil child!
The fote is in the whele.
Thou nost whoder turne
To wo other wele.

Child, thou ert a pilgrim
In wikidnis ibor;
Thou wandrest in this fals world;
Thou loke the bifor.
Deth ssal com with a blast
Ute of a wel dim horre, ‡
Adamis kin dun to cast,
Him silf hath ido befor.

* Prosper. † Memory. ‡ Mist, fog, cloud.

Lollai, lollai, litil child!
So wo the worth Adam
In the lond of Paradis
Throgh wikidnes of Satan.

Child, thou nert a pilgrim,
Bot an uncuthe gist;
Thi dawes beth itold;
Thi jurneis beth icast.
Whoder thou salt wend,
North other est,
Deth the sal betide
With bitter bale in brest.

Lollai, lollai, litil child!
This wo Adam the wroght,
Whan he of the appil ete,
And eve hit him betacht. *[1]

* Gave.

Let me now gather together the various characteristics revealed by this very cursory examination of Early English poetry, so that we may see whether they fall into any comprehensive form. Some of these characteristics may be distinguished as external. Firstly, there is the very striking fact of anonymity, and the general absence of an egotistic view-point that goes with it. Whether or not early poetry is written *by* the community, there is no doubt that it is written *for* it.

Secondly, we have the fact that the community accepts the poetry, makes it part of its life, and hands it down as a lively tradition. Poetry—and this is so difficult to realise nowadays—was part of daily life; it was not an esoteric mystery, not something to be hidden in the privacy of the library, not cabinet literature, but a social instrument, an open celebration, a common possession.

Internally, within the form of the poetry itself, we find

[1] From Chambers and Sidgwick, *Early English Lyrics*.

these distinctive qualities: directness of statement (absence of metaphor); realism or visual definiteness; absence of sentimentality; a tragic conception of life. Implied by these qualities is an extreme simplicity in the mechanism of verse: the verse is not artificial; the rhythms are instinctive, and metre a simple progressive beat devoid of artifice and elaboration.

These characteristics are so obvious that it does not seem necessary to expatiate further on them. But I would like once more to call in the support of the late Professor Gummere, whose erudition in these matters is so much beyond dispute.[1]

'The subjective, the reflective, the sentimental, are characteristics impossible in throng-made verse . . . the diction of a traditional ballad is spontaneous, simple, objective as speech itself, and close to actual life. The course of artistic poetry . . . is away from simplicity of diction and toward a dialect . . . the ballads lack figurative language and tropes; they rarely change either the usual order of words or the usual meaning. They lack not only antithesis, but even the common figure of inversion, the figure which one would most expect to meet in ballad style.'

There is only one more observation to make: the internal characteristics of early poetry are a direct reflection of its external characteristics, and these in their turn are a direct reflection of the social environment within which this early poetry was shaped. A community, as opposed to an individual, is comparatively incoherent; it can only express itself, or receive impressions, by means of a narrow range of symbols. These symbols must be simply constructed, easily apprehended, and so of a wide 'community' of appeal. These considerations amply explain the simple structure of early verse. The remaining characteristics are determined by the mentality of the early Northern peoples among whom this poetry arose. This mentality was itself determined by the bitter struggle against the hostile forces of nature. That en-

[1] Op. cit., pp. 189–190.

vironing hostility made men not only hardy and courageous in action, but also superstitious and gloomy in belief. The elements they faced were endowed with supernatural attributes, and were only to be exorcised by magic rites. Christianity did little to enliven the prevailing gloom; it seemed rather to complete the spiritual condition of the Northern races, expanding just those aspects of belief most evident to them—the state of original sin, the transitoriness of earthly joys, and the reality of the supernatural world. The art of such a spiritual condition is an art of escape; an art of the dancing throng or the intoxicated mead-hall; an art of the enthralling narrative or of the quieting lullaby:

> Moder, white as lily flour,
> Your lulling lesseth my languor.

But though it is an art of escape, it is not an art of deceit or self-deception. Just as in the corresponding plastic or graphic art the tendency is towards an abstraction which nevertheless is always based on, or returns to, the living forms of animals and plants, so in this verbal art of poetry the tendency all the time is to seek the abstraction of the refrain, but always to embroider it with the vitality and vivacity of an eager sensibility.

2

POETRY AND HUMANISM

There are only two generic forms of poetry: the 'popular' or racial poetry which was the subject of the last chapter, and the artistic or artificial poetry which is to occupy us for the whole of the remainder of this book. This is the distinction elaborated in the main by Herder, in his great works on folk-poetry, but for which Schlegel also deserves some credit. These theorists established an absolute dualism between poetry with a verbal or oral tradition (poetry said or sung) and poetry with a written tradition (poetry inspired by the expectation of 'a paper eternity'). In practice the distinction is clear enough, but one cannot make the difference too absolute. The act of writing poetry, even when that poetry is most stilted and artificial, is actually a method of representing sound by symbols: the poet does not test his poem by his eye, but by his ear, and though the mental representation of sound differs from the actual perception of sound, both in tone and complexity (just as the visionary conceptions of the mind far outreach any actual perceptions of the eye), yet in no sense does the poet of the study depart from the essential procedure of the poet of the camp-fire and carnival. The means, or shall we say the medium, is always in essence the same, differing only in degree of refinement or subtlety; it is the men that change, by enlarging their categories. Such an enlargement in recent years is due to the invention of broadcasting, which may yet have a decisive effect on the evolution of poetry.

Compared with the poetry of the ballads, the poetry of Chaucer is extremely complex. From our habit of excluding popular poetry from our critical categories, we have grown to regard Chaucer as comparatively a simple poet—simpler, at any rate, than Spenser, or Shakespeare, or Milton, not to mention the wilful complexities of minor poets. But, as a

matter of fact, Chaucer introduced into English poetry no less than thirteen new forms of metre, and added infinitely to the richness and flexibility of the common ballad metres. Take this description of Sir Thopas:

Sir Thopas wex a doghty swayn,
Whyt was his face as payndemayn,
His lippes rede as rose;
His rode is lyk scarlet in grayn,
And I yow telle in good certayn,
He hadde a semely nose.

His heer, his berd was lyk saffroun,
That to his girdel raughte adoun;
His shoon of Cordewane.
Of Brugges were his hosen broun,
His robe was of ciclatoun,
That cost many a jane.

He coude hunte at wilde deer,
And ryde an hauking for riveer,
With grey goshauk on honde;
Ther-to he was a good archeer,
Of wrastling was ther noon his peer,
Ther any ram shal stonde.

Ful many a mayde, bright in bour,
They moorne for him, paramour,
Whan hem were bet to slepe;
But he was chast and no lechour,
And sweet as is the bremble-flour
That bereth the rede hepe.

The difference here, where Chaucer approaches nearest to the popular ballads, will be found in a certain *conscious* handling of the form. It is, in fact, a parody, and, like most parodies, succeeds in being cleverer than the original it imitates. Even the last two lines quoted, which if isolated or put in another context would seem so simple and so delightful, are actually, and perhaps purposely, ludicrous. But

cleverness of this kind is merely incidental in Chaucer; to take the measure of his real complexity we must observe him when most sincere:

Pandare, which that sent from Troilus
Was to Criseyde, as ye han herd devyse,
That for the beste it was accorded thus,
And he ful glad to doon him that servyse,
Unto Criseyde, in a full secree wyse,
Ther-as she lay in torment and in rage,
Com hir to telle al hoolly his message.

And fond that she hir-selven gan to trete
Ful pitously; for with hir salte teres
Hir brest, hir face y-bathed was ful wete;
The mighty tresses of hir sonnish heres,
Unbroyden, hangen al aboute hir eres;
Which yaf him verray signal of martyre
Of deeth, which that hir herte gan desyre.

Whan she him saw, she gan for sorwe anoon,
Hir tery face a-twixe hir armes hyde,
For which this Pandare is so wo bi-goon,
That in the hous he mighte unnethe abyde,
As he that pitee felte on every syde.
For if Criseyde hadde erst compleyned sore,
Tho gan she pleyne a thousand tymes more.

And in hir aspre pleynte than she seyde,
'Pandare first of joyes mo than two
Was cause causinge unto me, Criseyde,
That now transmuwed been in cruel wo.
Wher shal I seye to yow "wel come" or no,
That alderfirst me broughte into servyse
Of love, allas! that endeth in swich wyse?

'Endeth than love in wo? Ye, or men lyeth!
And alle worldly blisse, as thinketh me,
The ende of blisse ay sorwe it occupyeth;

And who-so troweth not that it so be,
Lat him unto me, woful wrecche, y-see,
That my-self hate, and ay my birthe acorse,
Felinge alwey, fro wikke I go to worse.

'Who-so me seeth, he seeth sorwe al at ones,
Peyne, torment, pleynte, wo, distresse.
Out of my woful body harm ther noon is,
As anguish, langour, cruel bitternesse,
A-noy, smert, drede, fury, and eke siknesse.
I trowe, y-wis, from hevene teres reyne,
For pitee of myn aspre and cruel peyne!'

Troilus and Criseyde, IV, st. 116–121

Perhaps it is misleading to describe verse so direct in expression and appeal as complex, for the complexity I have in mind is not one of diction, but of emotion. *The Unquiet Grave* is as sorrowful and more superstitious; 'Lollai, lollai, litil child' is as tragic and far more fatalistic. But in the lament of Criseyde we have something more—self-hatred and spiritual sickness. The mood is subjective, the emotion self-regarding. It is, in Chaucer, a rare phenomenon, but it was eventually to involve the whole difference between a classical conception of life and the new ideals of humanism.

We are still too entangled in humanistic prejudices to be capable of an objective criticism of its premises. We are fed on the milk of humanism from the moment we enter the world, and our blood and brain are an organic compost of its elements. Fully to appreciate humanism one should get outside it; but that is so difficult. For an Englishman it means getting outside all his major literature from Chaucer to Browning, and he might feel that there was then precious little left to form a basis for criticism. The attempt was made by T. E. Hulme,[1] and though his criticism was of the most tentative and incomplete description, he did arrive at certain conclusions which we shall find of great value for our present purpose. He found, for example, that there was an

[1] *Speculations* (London: Kegan Paul, 1934).

absolute difference between humanism and the religious spirit. 'The *divine* is not *life* at its intensest. It contains in a way an almost *anti-vital* element; quite different, of course, from the non-vital character of the outside physical region. The questions of original sin, of chastity, of the motives behind Buddhism, etc., all part of the very essence of the religious spirit, are quite incomprehensible for humanism.' That is a distinction which enables us to divide off a whole province of religious or, as I would rather say, divine poetry from the humanistic poetry now under consideration, and this province we shall consider in a later chapter. Hulme also saw that an outside criticism of humanism would enable us to distinguish clearly between human and divine things, and so to avoid that confusion of the human and divine which is characteristic of romantic poetry.

The very word humanism describes its essence, and shows that this essence has been recognised all along. Human values, a human point of view, the perfection of humanity as an ideal—these were all held consciously and proudly. And it has always been imagined that such categories were something of a discovery; that before the Renaissance man lived in some kind of superstitious darkness in which he was unable to perceive his own beauty and value. A more sympathetic understanding of mediaeval philosophy has of late years enabled us to see the falsity of that interpretation of history; we now see that the Renaissance ideal was merely a different ideal, a different point of view, and that if mediaeval philosophy failed to recognise a human point of view and to appreciate humanitarian values, it was because it despised these values, or at any rate subordinated them to absolute or divine values. The Renaissance, therefore, should be regarded as a reversal of values, not as a discovery.

But the new position or point of view did enable man to discover himself. And discovering himself, he discovered the world outside himself. He found himself intimately concerned with this outside world, its centre and the highest point of its development. If we remember that this reversal

of values took place beneath clear skies and a warm sun, we then have the only other factor of importance in the change. The world seemed a veritable Bower of Bliss:

> The joyous birdes shrouded in chearefull shade,
> Their notes unto the voyce attempred sweet;
> Th' Angelicall soft trembling voyces made
> To th' instruments divine respondence meet:
> The silver sounding instruments did meet
> With the base murmure of the waters fall:
> The waters fall with difference discreet,
> Now soft, now loud, unto the wind did call:
> The gentle warbling wind low answered to all.
>
> *The Faerie Queene*, II, xii, 71

It is a world unknown to the early English poets; contrast it with the bitter inclemency of the Anglo-Saxon *Seafarer*, the 'wind and weet and snow and sleet' of the ballads, and the 'aspre and cruel payne' of Chaucer's *Criseyde*. Chaucer, it is true, has many humanistic traits. He has an interest in character, in personality, which is wholly new in English poetry. His varied interests, his curiosity, his learning in languages and in the world of romance opened up to him by this learning, all mark him out as a man who had discovered himself. But he is not a complete humanist: he is too objective, too impersonal, too restrained. He is sensual rather than sensuous, vulgar rather than curious; still, with all his learning, the poet of the community rather than of the cabinet.

Spenser is the first and most perfect representative of humanism in English poetry. He is one of the most perfect representatives in European literature. His influence on the form of English poetry was radical: he created the very poetic form of our language. He took elements from Ariosto and Tasso, from classical literature and romance literature, from native dialect and from Chaucer, and moulded these into an English poetic idiom which is still the best standard

or touchstone of English poetic sensibility. The great figure of Shakespeare has obscured his primary importance; the defection of Milton has obstructed his influence; the flutings of Tennyson and Swinburne have merely parodied his style. When Doughty went back direct to this primary source of our poetic idiom, we had so far lost our native sensibility that we found his diction strange, his meaning obscure, his music harsh. Doughty's poetry has still to meet with adequate appreciation; but his fault, due to his impractical impatience, was to defy three centuries and revert to a static historical norm, an arrested phase of development, instead of conceiving the stage which that norm would have reached by a normal development. Spenser's form is the form of his age; his sensibility is inherent in our language; the present need should be a modern form embodying Spenser's sensibility.

The Renaissance elements which in Chaucer are discrete, occasional, the material of his poetry rather than its essence, had by Spenser's time become an exclusive rage. Between Chaucer and Spenser there is the isolated figure of Skelton, who brought nothing to the development of English poetry except an English mind, full of native vigour and satiric pith. He is a link with the realism of Chaucer, and Spenser probably did not despise his 'ragged rhyme'. It was his respect for Skelton, and for the Skeltonian element in Chaucer, which enabled him to judge the experiments of Sidney and the Areopagus at their real worth. They were amusing enough, but 'why, a God's name may we not have the kingdom of our language' was his cry. The Renaissance in England brought with it tendencies which imperilled the tender growth of English poetry. The learned world was overwhelmed with pedantic fancies and vain desires of moulding English verse from classical models. Spenser joined in these literary fashions, and it has been suggested[1] that even his regard for Chaucer was of a pedantic origin, an outcome of antiquarianism rather than a natural affinity. In

[1] *Spenser*, by Emile Legouis (1926), pp. 57–8.

a sense this is true enough: the personalities of Chaucer and Spenser were different, their ideals dissimilar, and even the formal qualities of their verse, except where Spenser is deliberately imitating Chaucer, are quite distinct. But they both had the same sensitive regard for the English language, both had an intuitive apprehension of the poetic quality of English words, and this is the affinity that matters most in the growth of poetry. It is significant that Spenser, in his reference to Chaucer in the fourth book of *The Faerie Queene*, regards him above all as the 'well of English undefyled'.

Poetic sensibility—it is one of the axioms of this book—does not determine poetic form. It only yields the poetic essence—the quality without which there is no poetry, but which alone would be a disembodied quality, hard to imagine. Actually the essence surrenders to material associations; it becomes linked with the diction and thought of the poet. These in their turn owe almost everything to the spirit of the age; the poet depends on his social and cultural environment—not for his poetic sensibility, which is innate, but for opportunity and occasion to manifest this sensibility. Spenser found himself in a world eager for poetry, and though actually he voices a good deal of dissatisfaction with the age he lives in and the rewards of talent, yet we know that England was then stirring with the first premonitions of her greatest age, and that though Spenser's worldly gains were not equal to his ambitions, they were such as few poets in any other age were ever likely to receive.

The two great gifts that Spenser brought to English poetry might be summarised as a sensuous conception of beauty and a personal conception of poetry. The former is literally a longing to see the ideal beauty, platonically conceived, as visibly illustrated. Spenser seized on the particular aspect of Plato's theory that identifies beauty and virtue, or, at least, argues that moral virtue is a necessary consequence of the disciplined contemplation and creation of beautiful things. There is a sonnet in the *Amoretti*, perfect and complete in

itself, which will illustrate sufficiently this mingling of sacred and profane love:

Most glorious Lord of lyfe, that on this day,
Did'st make thy triumph over death and sin:
And having harrow'd hell, did'st bring away
Captivity thence captive us to win:
This joyous day, deare Lord, with joy begin,
And grant that we for whom thou diddest dye
Being with thy deare blood clene washt from sin,
May live for ever in felicity.
And that thy love we weighing worthily,
May likewise love thee for the same againe:
And for thy sake that all lyke deare did'st buy,
With love may one another entertayne.
So let us love, deare love, lyke as we ought,
Love is the lesson which the Lord us taught.

This sonnet illustrates well enough, too, the personal aspect of Spenser's poetry. 'All that he creates is alike moulded and controlled by his personal emotions, and is deeply charged with his own reflection.'[1] It is on this aspect of his genius that we must concentrate if we are to understand the real difference between Chaucer and Spenser—between the poet who was the last flower of the Middle Ages and the poet who was the perfect representative of the humanistic spirit of the Renaissance. It is not only that Spenser's attention in his poetry is directed to his own life and aspirations, with the result that nearly all his poems are disguises and allegories of his own experiences, autobiographical in their real nature, but more particularly that in Spenser we have for the first time a poet capable of sustained moods of introspection. Chaucer was capable of self-narrative but only rarely of self-revelation; his bent was towards reflection, which is rational, rather than towards introspection, which is emotional .The difference is more than one of

[1] Prof. E. de Selincourt: Introduction to the Oxford Edition of Spenser's *Works* (1924), p. lxvii.

degree or aspect; it involves a total reorientation of values. It is very significant that Spenser was an earnest, even a fanatical Protestant; and further, that he was an enthusiastic Platonist—a combination that was to determine the whole future course of English philosophy and philosophical idealism.

There is one further distinction to be made: the introspective quality of Spenser's mind did not involve what nowadays we should call a subjective style. The relation of poetic diction to poetic thought is a comparatively unexplored subject; I am not sure that there is any necessary connection between them at all. His diction makes or mars the poet; it is the expression of his personality, and as such is unequivocal. The thought of the poet is a factor which will enhance his general 'value', but it does not alter his poetic value. It is not, however, always possible to separate and distinguish the particular and poetic values from the general values—a difficulty very obvious in the history of Shakespearean criticism.[1] Fluidity is the most obvious characteristic of Spenser's diction, and adjectives like 'limpid', 'translucent', 'easy', 'graceful', most naturally describe its qualities. It is difficult to exaggerate his achieve-

[1] I am not sure whether the following observation of Prof. de Selincourt could be read to support this distinction. He is defending Spenser's use of the pastoral mode in his elegy on the death of Sidney. 'Readers have been disappointed that in his elegy upon *Astrophel* Spenser did not drop the pastoral cloak and speak in clearer accents. But this is to misunderstand both his mind and his art. There is nothing of the realist in Spenser's poetic constitution. His delicate reserve expresses his emotion far more in verbal cadence, in melody of phrasing, than by the logical value of words; and in the elaborate use of his characteristic effects of alliteration and repetition, he gives to the lay of *Astrophel* a lingering and tender pathos as potent and as moving as the direct expression of personal regard' (Op. cit., pp. xiii–xiv). This passage seems to imply a distinction between the 'poetical' and 'logical' values of words, which supports the interpretation of poetry which I am now putting forward.

ment in this respect. He must have had an extraordinary sensibility for the poetic qualities of English words—not only those in current use, but for the archaic words of Chaucer and the recondite dialect of the North of England. And to this sensibility he added a wide knowledge of poetic technique, his art being the reconciliation of this sensibility with his knowledge—a process which always calls for infinite patience. We know that Sir Philip Sidney, whose own verse rivals Spenser's in silken smoothness, had read and greatly admired *The Shepheardes Calendar*; and it is not impossible that Spenser had done much to reveal to Sidney the poetic possibilities of the English language, enabling him to write of it in his *Apologie* in these terms:

'Truly the English, before any other vulgar language I know, is fit for both sorts, Ancient and Modern versifying: for, for the Ancient, the Italian is so full of Vowels, that it must ever be cumbered with lisions. The Dutch, so of the other side with *Consonants*, that they cannot yeeld the sweet slyding, fit for a Verse: the French, in his whole language, hath not one word, that hath his accent in the last silable, saving two, called *Antepenultima*, and little more hath the Spanish: and therefore, very gracelessly may they use *Dactiles*. The English is subject to none of these defects.

Nowe, for the ryme, though we doe not observe quantity, yet wee observe the accent very precisely: which other languages, eyther cannot doe, or will not doe so absolutely. . . .'

English poetry had gained a confident self-consciousness; English poets were aware, as never before, of the richness of their native language. It was the wide culture of the Renaissance that gave them the comparative knowledge to grow to this awareness; it was the same culture that, at times too pedantically, enabled them to profit by the classical tradition, with its lessons of discipline, restraint, and harmony. Let me once again quote Professor de Selincourt as a valuable witness to these bare statements:

'He is among the very greatest of our poets, but the

significance of his poetry in the history of our literature is even greater than its intrinsic value. He re-creates English prosody, giving back to our verse the fluidity and the grace that it had lost since the days of Chaucer, and extending the range of its achievement; he created English poetic diction, lifting it from anarchy and stiffness, daring greatly, but triumphing whether in the simple or the ornate, widening its scope, but at the same time never failing to give it ease and flexibility, so that language became to him a willing servant, and could voice the subtlest shades of mood or fancy. By means of this rich and varied style, fully expressive of his high seriousness, his spirituality, his inexhaustible sense of beauty, he has exercised a spell that has been potent for three centuries, and none has called so many poets to their vocation.'[1]

It perhaps remains to illustrate more precisely 'the sweet slyding' of Spenser's verse; there is an immense choice, but these three verses from the Lament in the XIth eclogue of *The Shepheardes Calendar* have all Spenser's qualities in perfection:

Ay me that dreerie death should strike so mortall stroke,
That can undoe Dame natures kindly course:
The faded lockes fall from the loftie oke,
The flouds do gaspe, for dryed is theyr sourse,
And flouds of teares flowe in theyr stead perforse.
The mantled meadowes mourne,
Theyr sondry colours tourne.
O heavie herse,
The heavens doe melt in teares without remorse.
O carefull verse.

The feeble flocks in field refuse their former foode,
And hang theyr heads, as they would learne to weepe:
The beastes in forest wayle as they were woode,
Except the Wolves, that chase the wandring sheepe:
Now she is gon that safely did hem keepe,

[1] Op. cit., pp. xxxix–xl.

The Turtle on the bared braunch,
Laments the wound, that death did launch.
O heavie herse,
And *Philomele* her song with teares doth steepe.
O carefull verse.

The water Nymphs, that wont with her to sing and daunce,
And for her girlond Olive braunches beare,
Now baleful boughes of Cypres doen advaunce:
The Muses, that were wont greene bayes to weare,
Now bringen bitter Eldre braunches seare,
The fatall sisters eke repent,
Her vitall threde so soone was spent.
O heavie herse,
Morne now my Muse, now morne with heavie cheare.
O carefull verse.

The inspiration is classical, or, more immediately, 'made in imitation of Marot his song, which he made upon the death of Loys the frenche Queene.' But that merely shows the fulness of this triumph of the English language; it finds its own poetic diction, it maintains its own idiom, and yet it rivals all its predecessors in sureness and variety, in technical skill and artistic effect.

What remained to be achieved? Spenser, after all, is not the highest reach of English poetry, but Shakespeare. We have therefore to ask ourselves, What did Shakespeare contribute to the development of English poetic diction, over and above the grace and fluidity of Spenser? The flow of Spenser's verse is smooth and limpid; the pattern lies in its clear depths, beneath the sinuous but unruffled surface. Turn to the flow of Shakespeare's verse; it ripples swiftly by you, clear as in Spenser's stream, but glittering with a thousand reflected suns; like the dew in Julia's hair that glittered to Herrick's sight:

As when the beams
Have their reflected light
Danced by the streams.

These glittering beams are not merely fanciful images; they have their equivalents in the wealth of metaphors which decorate Shakespeare's verse, and to his use of metaphor we trace his difference from Spenser and the most distinguishing quality of his poetry. Spenser, in spite of his continual use of allegory, kept to the visual significance of words; each word distinct and separate, pebbles in the stream. But now words were to flash with interverbal meanings; they no longer reflect an equivalent and logical meaning; they become mere sounds and symbols suggesting a meaning beyond the compass of words, seized only by the intuition of the poet.

3

POETRY AND LOVE

Stendhal, who was a self-established authority on the subject, distinguished four different kinds of love—passionate love (*l'amour-passion*), sophisticated love (*l'amour-goût*), physical love (*l'amour physique*) and calculated love (*l'amour de vanité*). He admitted that there were various nuances which had the effect of blurring the edges of his categories, and that changes might occur in the course of one kind of love which gradually transformed it into another kind. But the analysis which he gave in the treatise he wrote at the height of the Romantic Movement (in 1820) was very acute, and remains essentially true.

The recognition given to each kind of love has varied from age to age. Even physical love, the instinct that ensures the perpetuation of the race, is subject to variations, as the birthrate shows. Calculated love, the love that satisfies social vanity and leads to a sensible marriage, is characteristic of all societies with a complex class structure (not necessarily civilised societies, for some primitive tribes recognise no other kind of love). Sophisticated love is an elaborate artifice developed to relieve the boredom of an idle life; it may have elements of delicacy which are lacking in passionate love, but unless it serves some further interest, such as vanity, it is merely ephemeral.

Each kind of love has its characteristic poetry, but only passionate love evokes poetry of the highest order, and it has done this only during certain limited periods of history. We tend to think of love and poetry as somehow inevitably linked, but there are phases of poetry that know nothing of love, and great poets who have never written a love poem.

What we call passionate love is a unique product of the culture of Western Europe. Denis de Rougement regards it as 'an invention of the twelfth century', though he admits

that the matter is more complex. 'At all times and in all places the *natural* growth of what I call passionate love has been visible. But alike in Greece and Rome and in the East the frenzy of passion was treated as simply a frenzy and nothing more. Not until the twelfth century—the century of Abélard, Saint Bernard, the Troubadours and *Tristan*—and then in Western Europe, did the natural seeds of passion, instead of being destroyed, suddenly begin to be cultivated. The love frenzy was raised to the level of a religious wisdom. It was given a symbolical expression that made it acceptable, a dignified form, and a rhetoric that endowed it with standing. Unfortunate love was admitted to be beautiful and good *to the extent it was woeful.*'[1]

Mr de Rougemont is writing his book as a moralist, and his purpose is to condemn passionate love, which he regards as one of the chief causes of the social disintegration of the modern age. He is not a crude puritan who would suppress all the literature that in the past has expressed the frenzy of passionate love. His argument is rather that times have changed, and that we can no longer afford to indulge the passion. 'The cult of passionate love', he writes, 'has been so far *democratised* as to have lost its aesthetic virtues together with its spiritual and tragic values; and we are left with a dull and diluted pain, something unclean and gloomy. In profaning the falsely sacred causes of this, I cannot believe that we have anything to lose. The literature dealing with passion, the advertising which passion gets, the businesslike "vogue" of what used to be a religious secret—all this needs to be attacked and made war upon, if only to rescue the myth from abuse in its excessive popularisation. And whatever sacrilege we may thereby commit will not matter; for poetry has other outlets'.[2]

Poetry may have other outlets, but before we so complacently divert it to them, it would be as well to form some

[1] *Passion and Society*, trans. by Montgomery Belgion. London (Faber & Faber) 1940, p. 9.

[2] Ibid., p. 31.

estimate of the range and quality of this phase of our verse. Of the distinctiveness of its quality there is no doubt, but from the beginning it is necessary to bear Stendhal's definitions in mind. The medieval tradition from which the whole of this phase of poetry is derived already shows two distinct varieties of love poetry—the *chanson courtois* and the *chanson populaire*.[1] The *chanson courtois* is in general an expression of *l'amour goût*. As Professor Chambers has pointed out, 'this literature is generally reticent, so far as regards the expression of the physical side of love . . . There is not even much insistence upon corporeal beauty. Many stanzas are devoted to refining on the psychology of love, and but comparatively few to the celebration of the *bels gens cors* and the *bel oir vair et riant et cler*. The whole literature, indeed, for all its undeniable grace and charm, is self-conscious. The *trouvères* are more in love with love than with their mistresses.'[2] For this reason it will be more properly considered when we deal with poetry and sentiment. The poetry of passionate love is in all these respects quite different. Professor Chambers goes so far as to say that while the *chanson courtois* is not only platonic, but masculine, the *chanson populaire*, 'invariably and in complete contradiction to the tone of the *chanson courtois* approaches love from the woman's point of view. The yearning, the surrender, the rapture, the endurance, the submission, the regret of woman's love; these are the arguments throughout of *chansons d'histoire*, of *aubes*, and of *refrains*.'[3]

[1] 'Chanson populaire', a term we owe, I believe, to Gaston Paris, a great authority on the French poetry of this period, is a misleading term if we allow it to imply that this kind of poetry was in some sense a folk-poetry, while the 'chanson courtois' was a court-poetry—the one the untutored expression of yokels, the other an art form elaborated by a professional poet. The folk-song proper we have already dealt with as a derivative of the ballad.

[2] 'Some Aspects of Mediaeval Lyric'. *Early English Lyrics*, London (Sidgwick & Jackson), 1926, pp. 263–4.

[3] Op. cit., p. 268.

As a general description this is undoubtedly true, but I think we get a little nearer to the secret of the appeal of this poetry by observing its integral nature. It encompasses both terms of a passionate tension, and in that sense it is inclusive, even objective. Moreover, it is dramatic, or, more exactly, dialogical. *Perdidi musam tacendo:* love dies unless there is a mutual exchange of vows, and of more than vows. The tone of this poetry is set already in the fourth century, in that *Pervigilium Veneris* which is the earliest as it is the most perfect expression of passionate love:

> iam loquaces ore rauco stagna cycni perstrepunt:
> adsonat Terei puella subter umbram populi,
> ut potes motus amoris ore dici musicos,
> at neges queri sororem de marito barbaro.
>
> cras amet qui nunquam amavit quique amavit cras amet.[1]

It is absurd to suppose any continuity of poetic tradition over a period of a thousand years, but the same tone reappears in a quatrain of English verse to which no precise date can be assigned, but which might well stand for ever as the prototype of this kind of poetry:

> Western wind, when will thou blow,
> The small rain down can rain?
> Christ, if my love were in my arms
> And I in my bed again!

[1] There are several translations of this miraculous poem, but none so sensitive as Allen Tate's, which appears as an appendix to his *Poems 1922–1947*, London (Eyre & Spottiswoode) and New York (Scribners), 1948. This particular verse is translated as follows:

> Now the tall swans with hoarse cries thrash the lake:
> The girl of Tereus pours from the poplar ring
> Musical change—sad sister who bewails
> Her act of darkness with the barbarous king!
>
> Tomorrow may loveless, may lover tomorrow make love.

This poem is probably later than Chaucer, but the same note is struck in lyrics of an earlier date—in 'Lenten is come with love to toune' and 'When the nyhtėgalė singes'—

Bituenė Lyncolne ant Lyndeseye,
Norhamptoun ant Lounde,
Ne wot I non so fayr a may,
As I go fore ybounde.
Suetė lemmon, I preyė the,
Thou lovie me a stounde!

Chaucer himself is so various that like Shakespeare he might be said to encompass every variety of love. His fundamental mood is perhaps a somewhat rueful and humorous reflection on the penalties of passionate love:

Nas never pyk walwėd in galauntyne*
As I in love am walwėd and ywounde;
For which ful ofte I of myself divyne
That I am trewė Tristam the secounde.
My love may not refreyd† be nor afounde.‡
I brenne ay in an amorous plesaunce.
Do what you list, I wil your thral be founde,
Thogh ye to me ne do no daliaunce.

The ballad, 'Hyde, Absolon, thy giltė tresses clere,' is a *chanson courtois*, and much of Chaucer's poetry, like its French and Italian models, is to be placed in this category. But what is most characteristically Chaucerian is a descriptive realism which, if it were merely objective, would be a celebration of physical love. But take the description of the Carpenter's wife from 'The Milleres Tale':

Fair was this yonge wyf, and ther-with-al
As any wesele hir body gent and smal . . .
And sikerly she hadde a likerous yë.
Ful smale y-pulled were hir browes two,
And tho were bent, and blake as any sloo.

* *walwed in galauntyne*, rolled in sauce, soused.
† *refreyd*, cooled. ‡ *afounde*, perish.

She was ful more blisful on to see
Than is the newe pere-jonette tree;
And softer than the wolle is of a wether . . .
Ful brighter was the shyning of hir hewe
Than in the tour the noble y-forged newe.
But of hir song, it was as loude and yerne
As any swalwe sittinge on a berne.
Ther-to she coude skippe and make game,
As any kide or calf folwinge his dame.
Her mouth was swete as bragot or the meeth,
Or hord of apples leyd in hey or heeth.
Winsinge she was, as is a joly colt,
Long as a mast, and upright as a bolt . . .
Hir shoes were laced on hir legges hye;
She was a prymerole, a pigges nye
For any lord to leggen in his bedde,
Or yet for any good yeman to wedde.

Chaucer is not expressing his own passionate love of the lady; but only a poet for whom love was an affair of the passions rather than of the senses could have appreciated feminine beauty in precisely such a vivid style. Stendhal characterises physical love as 'sec et malheureux'; which is anything but descriptive of the love celebrated by Chaucer.

John Skelton's 'commendations' of various ladies have great charm, but they are playful rather than passionate.

Steadfast of thought,
Well made, well wrought,
Far may be sought
Erst than ye can find
So courteous, so kind,
As merry Margaret, the midsummer flower,
Gentle as falcon or hawk of the tower.

But with Sir Thomas Wyatt a new range of feeling and expression enters English poetry:

They fled from me, that sometime did me seek
With naked foot, stalking in my chamber.
I have seen them gentle, tame, and meek,
That now are wild, and do not remember
That sometime they put themselves in danger
To take bread at my hand; and now they range
Busily seeking with a continual change.

Thanked be fortune it hath been otherwise
Twenty times better; but once, in special,
In thin array, after a pleasant guise,
When her loose gown from her shoulders did fall,
And she me caught in her arms long and small,
Therewith all sweetly did me kiss
And softly said, 'Dear heart how like you this?'

It was no dream; I lay broad waking:
But all is turned, thorough my gentleness,
Into a strange fashion of forsaking;
And I have leave to go of her goodness,
And she also to use newfangleness.
But since that I so kindly am served,
I would fain know what she hath deserved.

The fact that much of Wyatt's work is Italianate in form (some of it directly translated from Petrarch) has tended to obscure its originality. I am not suggesting that Petrarch's love poetry is artificial (the very contrary is rather true) and a translation is not necessarily a slavish imitation—it can, in the hands of a true poet, express the feelings of the translator rather than those of the poet translated. But what I am trying to isolate in this chapter is not a manner of treatment but a certain intensification of vision, a new phase of poetry which springs directly from a new manner of feeling. It is contained within a century—Wyatt, we may assume, began to write his love poems in the 1520's; Donne had ceased to write his by 1615. It is not a continuous phase—Wyatt is a precursor, and it is Spenser, born fifty years later, who

announces, with his *Shepherds' Calendar* (1579), the onset of the veritable frenzy. It is all over by 1620 at the latest, and one is left guessing for the causes of such a remarkable historical phenomenon.

Many suggestions have been made—the influences of foreign poetry cannot be left out of account, not only the Italian influences already mentioned, but more pertinently, the French. I do not know to what extent the poetry of Scève and Louise Labé, of Ronsard and Du Bellay, was read and imitated by their contemporaries in England; but it is natural for a poet to be curious about what is happening in his art in a neighbouring country, and one so close as France. I do not believe that the French poetry of the period has quite the same degree of erotic forcefulness as the English poetry, though there are exceptions:

> O doux plaisir plein de doux pensement,
> Quand la douceur de la douce mêlée
> Étreint et joint l'âme en l'âme mêlée,
> Le corps au corps accouplé doucement . . .

But nowhere is there such unflagging zest in the celebration of 'Love's sensual empery' as in England, and the explanation is perhaps to be sought in a very natural place—in the physical beauty of the English women of that time. For this there is independent witness—there is Erasmus's famous tribute in one of his letters ('these bland and easy nymphs with more than Muse-like charms. Entering they salute thee; departing they embrace thee. O Faustus, didst thou but know the delicacy and sweetness surrounding these divinities, thou wouldst engage to travel, not ten years, but all thy life, and for ever in England'.) There is the even more generous praise expressed by Giordano Bruno, who was in England from 1583–5, and who was certainly not favourably impressed by other aspects of our life. His *Heroic Rapture* was inspired by the beauty of English women, and his *Supper of Ashes* opens with an appreciation of their charms.

The frenzy disappeared as suddenly and as inexplicably as it first came on, and left behind an almost physical sense of exhaustion. A hundred and fifty years were to pass before it was reanimated, in the love songs of Burns, and it was never to dominate our poetry so exclusively again. It is no exaggeration to say that in the fifty years between 1570 and 1620 nine-tenths of our great love poetry was written. It only remains for me to give the reader some idea of its variety and scope.

The whole of Spenser's verse is drenched in sensuous imagery, and in so far as this imagery is erotic, it is unabashed. The *Epithalamion* is surely the most enraptured celebration of passionate love in European literature—for comparisons we must go to the Orient, to the Song of Songs and the Dīwān of Hāfiz. But Spenser's love poetry is not merely sensuous—indeed, the distinctive characteristic of this whole phase is a certain union of sensuousness (even sensuality) and seriousness, even reverence. I have already quoted (page 37) a sonnet from *Amoretti* which illustrates this fusion of the sacred and profane, but only the *Epithalamion* in its completeness can give the reader any conception of the range from carnality to honour and chastity, a transition without force or falsity:

> Tell me, ye merchants' daughters, did ye see
> So fair a creature in your town before,
> So sweet, so lovely, and so mild as she,
> Adorned with beauty's grace and virtue's store?
> Her goodly eyes like sapphires shining bright,
> Her forehead ivory white,
> Her cheeks like apples which the sun hath rudded,
> Her lips like cherries charming men to bite,
> Her breast like to a bowl of cream uncrudded,
> Her paps like lilies budded,
> Her snowy neck like to a marble tower,
> And all her body like a palace fair,
> Ascending up with many a stately stair,
> To honour's seat and chastity's sweet bower.

Those few lines are an epitome of its complete achievement.

Only a decade separates Spenser from Shakespeare, but in that time there appeared a score of poets, any one of whom would illustrate our theme. Admittedly much of the verse of Lyly and Greene, of Peele, Lodge, Breton and Nashe, is artificial, written within the pastoral convention.

> What thing is love? for sure love is a thing.
> It is a prick, it is a sting,
> It is a pretty, pretty thing;
> It is a fire, it is a coal,
> Whose flame creeps in at every hole;
> And as my wit doth best devise,
> Love's dwelling is in ladies' eyes . . .

—fresh and vigorous as such verses may be, they grow tedious if often repeated, and without the music of the lute for which they were often devised. But the note of disillusion is never far away:

> Beauty is but a flower
> Which wrinkles will devour;
> Brightness falls from the air,
> Queens have died young and fair,
> Dust hath closed Helen's eye.
> I am sick, I must die.
> Lord, have mercy on us!

But Nashe was writing in plague time; and so, for that matter, was Marlowe, and in Marlowe the passion is absolute. In 'The Passionate Shepherd to his Love' the emotion may have been wrought into cool artifice, but the cry that escapes from the lips of Faustus, as he embraces Helen, is loaded with all the wonder and the doom of love.

And so we come to Shakespeare, and to his contemporaries, Samuel Daniel and Michael Drayton. Daniel is a meditative, rueful poet, and his Delia is no doubt a literary love. But there is genuine passion, none the less, in lines like these:

Delia herself, and all the world, may view
Best in my face where cares have till'd deep furrows.
No bays I seek to deck my mourning brow,
O clear-eyed Rector of the holy hill!
My humble accents bear the olive bough
Of intercession, but to move her will.

Daniel's real greatness lies elsewhere, in those marmoreal epistles which should be reckoned among the greatest poems in our language. Drayton's treatment of love is more light-hearted, and is seen at its best in the pastoral convention which he brought to such delicate perfection; and yet his 'Sonnets to Idea' seem to have more substantial experience in them than Daniel's similar sequence.

Since there's no help, come let us kiss and part.
Nay, I have done; you get no more of me,
And I am glad, yea, glad with all my heart,
That thus so cleanly I myself can free;
Shake hands for ever, cancel all our vows,
And when we meet at any time again,
Be it not seen in either of our brows
That we one jot of former love retain.
Now at the last gasp of Love's latest breath,
When, his pulse failing, Passion speechless lies,
When Faith is kneeling by his bed of death,
And Innocence is closing up his eyes,
Now if thou wouldst, when all have given him over,
From death to life thou mightst him yet recover.

Such a poem is an anticipation of Donne's mordancy:

So, so, break off this last lamenting kiss,
Which sucks two souls, and vapours both away . . .

There is no aspect of love that is not covered by Shakespeare's poetry. He is as analytical as Stendhal, and far profounder. In no sector of his immense range of apprehension is his intuition so penetrating, his descriptive power so exact. In his early work he is playful and artificial:

Sweet Cytherea, sitting by a brook
With young Adonis, lovely, fresh, and green,
Did court the lad with many a lovely look,
Such looks as none could look but beauty's queen.
She told him stories to delight his ear;
She show'd him favours to allure his eye;
To win his heart, she touch'd him here and there—
Touches so soft still conquer chastity . . .

But already in *Venus and Adonis* the play is becoming a little rough, the expression a little too crude for the convention:

Her arms do lend his neck a sweet embrace;
Incorporate then they seem, face grows to face.
Till breathless, he disjoin'd, and backward drew
The heavenly moisture, that sweet coral mouth,
Whose precious taste her thirsty lips well knew,
Whereon they surfeit, yet complain on drouth:
He with her plenty press'd, she faint with dearth,
Their lips together glu'd, fall to the earth . . .
And having felt the sweetness of the spoil,
With blindfold fury she begins to forage;
Her face doth reek and smoke, her blood doth boil,
And careless lust stirs up a desperate courage . . .

There is a brutality about such 'careless lust', such 'hard embracing', that points forward to the bitter realism of *Othello*, *Anthony and Cleopatra*, *Measure for Measure*:

O thou weed!
Who art so lovely fair and smell'st so sweet
That the senses ache at thee . . .
Other women cloy
The appetites they feed, but she makes hungry
Where most she satisfies; for vilest things
Become themselves in her, that the holy priests
Bless her when she is riggish . . .

But even Cleopatra is recognised as:

a woman, and commanded
By such poor passion as the maid that milks
And does the meanest chores . . .

It is in *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Merchant of Venice* that passionate love receives its purest, most illusory, representation:

Jul. O! for a falconer's voice,
To lure this tassel-gentle back again.
Bondage is hoarse, and may not speak aloud,
Else would I tear the cave where Echo lies,
And make her airy tongue more hoarse than mine,
With repetition of my Romeo's name.

Rom. It is my soul that calls upon my name:
How silver-sweet sound lovers' tongues by night,
Like softest music to attending ears!

But even in this play the passion is not controlled by modesty or reason. The Friar's counsel ('These violent delights have violent ends . . . therefore love moderately') is disregarded. Juliet, alone in the orchard, can cry:

Come, civil night,
Thou sober-suited matron, all in black,
And learn me how to lose a winning match,
Play'd for a pair of stainless maidenhoods:
Hood my unmann'd blood, bating in my cheeks,
With thy black mantle; till strange love, grown bold,
Think true love acted simple modesty.
Come, night! come, Romeo! come, thou day in night!
For thou wilt lie upon the wings of night,
Whiter than new snow on a raven's back.
Come, gentle night; come, loving, black-brow'd night,
Give me my Romeo: and, when he shall die,
Take him and cut him out in little stars,
And he will make the face of heaven so fine
That all the world will be in love with night,
And pay no worship to the garish sun . . .

'Strange' love is romantic love, passionate love, and no one could be more conscious of its predestined liability to disaster than Shakespeare. But he does not on that account condemn it: to this passion, as to all other human emotions, he is the spectator *ab extra*, and his own desire is always to 'bear free and patient thoughts'. His own involvement in the passionate varieties of love may be deduced from the Sonnets, which in themselves, all other poetry set aside, would for ever justify our human indulgence in this fatal emotion. I have no desire to be obscure in an issue where the critics of romantic literature have been so explicit. If I understand their moralism rightly, they would consider Shakespeare's Sonnets (not to mention *Tristan* and all the poetry and music evoked by that name) well lost if the institution of marriage could be preserved in its purity. I think that Shakespeare would have felt that life, in the biological sense, is independent, if not defiant, of moral codes; and though he would surely have held that life, in any sense worth the living, is promoted by a progressive refinement of ideals and aspirations, he would have placed high, if not highest among the vitalising and life-enhancing forces, the poetic faculty. Whatever feeds its sacred flame is itself sacred and beyond our human conception of good and evil. Love, he wrote:

> is not love
> Which alters when it alteration finds,
> Or bends with the remover to remove:
> O, no! it is an ever-fixed mark,
> That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
> It is the star to every wandering bark,
> Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.
> Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
> Within his bending sickle's compass come;
> Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
> But bears it out even to the edge of doom.

The poet is here speaking of individual love; in any universal

sense, his boast is merely rhetorical. It is not the love, but the poetry born of love, that endures, and that in enduring deepens and refines the springs of life itself. The same poetic essence is distilled from other emotional experiences, and not least from disillusioned love.

> The expense of spirit in a waste of shame
> Is lust in action; and till action, lust
> Is perjur'd, murderous, bloody, full of blame,
> Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust;
> Enjoy'd no sooner but despised straight;
> Past reason hunted; and no sooner had,
> Past reason hated . . .

Again, the experience is individual. But what is now to be observed is that shortly after the turn of the century an endemic change took place in English poetry, particularly in relation to the passion of love. Critics have often spoken of a 'pessimistic' period in Shakespeare's development, which reached its lowest pitch of disillusionment in *Timon*. But Shakespeare was not alone in his harsh reaction. Quite suddenly, between 1605 and 1610, the innocence, the gaiety, the fantasy and artifice, went out of English love poetry. The change was so absolute, and in a sense catastrophic, that one is tempted to seek a cause in social conditions. In 1603 the plague broke out in London, and in that year killed 38,000 people. It continued to rage in London and other parts of the country for about eight years. But epidemics of equal severity had occurred within living memory —in 1592, in 1580–2, in 1563–4, in 1537–9; and these calamities had not altered the course of true love, nor damped its celebration in verse. It is difficult to discover any social or economic factors which could have had emotional reactions, and which are not equally prevalent in the second half of the sixteenth and the first half of the seventeenth century. In the absence of such a materialistic explanation we are driven to psychological theories: to the simple sup-

position that a frenzy had run its course; a phase of eroticism had given place to a phase of rueful meditation.

The change would not have seemed so absolute had not this poetry of passionate love before it expired flared up to its intensest brilliance. The love poetry of Shakespeare is various and the thought that accompanies it can be profound, but it must yield, in certain aspects, to the more concentrated power of the love poetry of Donne. From the songs and elegies which Donne wrote between 1595 and 1605 there emerges not so much a *dolce stil nuovo* (though a new manner is involved) as a higher degree of passionate awareness, a finer consciousness of the spiritual resonances of eroticism. It was a synthesis on a higher level of emotional development, and as such has never been surpassed by subsequent poetry. Sir Herbert Grierson, in his masterly essay on 'The Poetry of Donne',[1] has given a description of Donne's achievement which resumes, in a few learned pages, the whole complex development of love poetry in Europe. Donne's uniqueness is clearly established:

'Donne's love-poetry is a very complex phenomenon, but the two dominant strains in it are just these: the strain of dialectic, subtle play of argument and wit, erudite and fantastic; and the strain of vivid realism, the record of a passion which is not ideal nor conventional, neither recollected in tranquillity nor a pure product of literary fashion, but love as an actual, immediate experience in all its moods, gay and angry, scornful and rapturous with joy, touched with tenderness and darkened with sorrow—though these last two moods, the commonest in love-poetry, are with Donne the rarest. The first of these strains comes to Donne from the Middle Ages, the dialectic of the Schools, which passed into mediaeval love-poetry almost from its inception; the second is the expression of the new temper of the Renaissance as Donne had assimilated it in Latin countries...'

After pointing out the dualism inherent in the medieval doctrine of love, a dualism from which there was no escape

[1] Introduction to *The Poems of John Donne*. 2 vols. Oxford, 1912.

except the kind of canonisation given to Beatrice by Dante, and after showing how the second strain had, by the end of the sixteenth century, 'become a literary artifice, a refining upon outworn and extravagant conceits,' Sir Herbert detects 'a new warmth and spirit' coming from classical poetry 'with its simpler, less metaphysical strain, its equally intense but more realistic description of passion, its radically different conception of the relation between the lovers and of the influence of love in man's life. 'Though superficially Donne's poetry is less classical than either Marlowe's or Shakespeare's nevertheless 'there is no poet the spirit of whose love-poetry is so classical, so penetrated with the sensual, realistic, scornful tone of the Latin lyric and elegaic poets.' There are differences—more wit and gaiety, less heartlessness; and an immediacy which reflects personal experience.

Donne's love poetry has acquired a reputation for cynicism, for scorn and mordancy, for bitterness and disillusion, but though these qualities are not absent, the finest note in Donne's poetry, as Sir Herbert Grierson again points out, is 'the note of joy, the joy of mutual and contented passion . . . it is only in the fragments of Sappho, the lyrics of Catullus, and the songs of Burns that one will find the sheer joy of loving and being loved expressed in the same direct and simple language as in some of Donne's songs, only in Browning that one will find the same simplicity of feeling combined with a like swift and subtle dialectic.'

It is difficult to select a single poem to illustrate all the various qualities of Donne's love poetry. The briefest selection should include a poem like the Nineteenth Elegy, which is a sensuous celebration of 'full nakedness' and nothing more, as well as a poem like 'The Extasie' in which the subtlest thought is dialectically involved with the strongest passion. There are poems like 'A Nocturnal upon S. Lucies Day' that are so unique in their metaphysical fantasy that they cry out for quotation, and there are poems so simple and so effortless in their expression that they seem to come from a more innocent world—a song like 'Sweetest

love, I do not go, For weariness of thee'. But the greatest poems are perhaps those in which passion, to quote Sir Herbert Grierson once again, 'has lost the exclusive consciousness of itself which is lust, and become merged in an entire affection, as a turbid and discoloured stream is lost in the sea.' Such a poem is 'The Anniversary':

All kings, and all their favorites,
All glory of honors, beauties, wits,
The sun itself, which makes times, as they pass,
Is elder by a year, now, than it was
When thou and I first one another saw:
All other things to their destruction draw,
Only our love hath no decay;
This, no to-morrow hath, nor yesterday,
Running it never runs from us away,
But truly keeps his first, last, everlasting day.

Two graves must hide thine and my coarse,
If one might, death were no divorce.
Alas, as well as other Princes, we,
(Who Prince enough in one another be,)
Must have at last in death, these eyes, and ears,
Oft fed with true oaths, and with sweet salt tears;
But souls where nothing dwells but love
(All other thoughts being inmates) then shall prove
This, or a love increased there above,
When bodies to their graves, souls to their graves remove.

And then we shall be thoroughly blest,
But we no more, than all the rest;
Here upon earth, we are Kings, and none but we
Can be such Kings, nor of such subjects be.
Who is so safe as we? where none can do
Treason to us, except one of us two.
True and false fears let us refrain,
Let us love nobly, and live, and add again
Years and years unto years, till we attain
To write threescore: this is the second of our reign.

On such a note of exaltation Elizabethan love-poetry dies. There are scattered notes of natural joy in Herrick and Marvell, there is Henry King's lovely 'Exequy', but otherwise English poetry is dead to passionate love, especially in the exalted form expressed by Donne. Such sensuousness and such intensity was not to re-enter the stream of English poetry until, nearly two centuries later, an Ayrshire peasant broke through the filigree and artifice with:

O my love's like a red, red rose
That's newly sprung in June

and a London mystic sang of 'The Garden of Love', still a little abstractly:

I went to the Garden of Love,
And saw what I never had seen:
A Chapel was built in the midst,
Where I used to play on the green.

And the gates of this Chapel were shut,
And 'Thou shalt not' writ over the door;
So I turn'd to the Garden of Love
That so many sweet flowers bore;

And I saw it was filled with graves,
And tomb-stones where flowers should be;
And priests in black gowns were walking their rounds,
And binding with briars my joys and desires.

Even in Shelley, for whom passionate love was such a reality in his life, the subject becomes etherialised in his poetry:

I can give not what men call love,
  But wilt thou accept not
The worship the heart lifts above
  And the Heavens reject not—
The desire of the moth for the star
  Of the night for the morrow,
The devotion to something afar
  From the sphere of our sorrow?

How the comparison with Donne shows up the essential falsity of such a pose! There is more substance in *Epipsychidion*, and certainly a doctrine of passionate love, but the poem is a statement of the theme rather than a celebration of sensuous experience:

> She met me, Stranger, upon life's rough way,
> And lured me towards sweet Death; as Night by Day,
> Winter by Spring, or Sorrow by swift Hope,
> Led into light, life, peace. . . .

Always we are led off into such abstractions, and sigh for the piercing realism of but one 'bracelet of bright hair about the bone'.

It is only in Browning that the defeated passion revives in its true colours. Browning did not dissemble; he might not dare, but he perhaps dared greatly considering the hypocrisy he had to contend with:

> I liked the way you had with your curls
> Wound to a ball in a net behind:
> Your cheek was chaste as a quaker-girl's,
> And your mouth—there was never, to my mind,
> Such a funny mouth, for it would not shut;
> And the dented chin too—what a chin!
> There were certain ways when you spoke, some words
> That you know you never could pronounce:
> You were thin, however; like a bird's
> Your hand seemed—some would say, the pounce
> Of a scaly-footed hawk—all but!
> The world was right when it called you thin.
>
> But I turn my back on the world: I take
> Your hand, and kneel, and lay to my lips.
> Bid me live, Edith! Let me slake
> Thirst at your presence! Fear no slips:
> 'Tis your slave shall pay, while his soul endures,
> Full due, love's whole debt, *summum jus*.

My queen shall have high observance, planned
Courtship made perfect, no least line
Crossed without warrant. There you stand,
Warm too, and white too: would this wine
Had washed all over that body of yours,
Ere I drank it, and you down with it, thus!

The sentiment is not so crisp as in Donne, but here and generally in Browning's love-poetry, the passion is real. It is real, too, in some of Emily Brontë's poems, however imaginatively conceived; it is real, too, a little later, in Meredith, though mingled with a lot of roguish falseness.

In Hardy there is much play with the social circumstances of love, but the passion is in the past, a subject for anecdote or reflection, rarely actual:

The flame crept up the portrait line by line
As it lay in the silence of night's profound,
And over the arm's incline,
And along the marge of the silkwork superfine,
And gnawed at the delicate bosom's defenceless round.

Then I vented a cry of hurt, and averted my eyes;
The spectacle was one that I could not bear,
To my deep and sad surprise;
But, compelled to heed, I again looked furtivewise
Till the flame had eaten her breasts, and mouth, and hair.

'Thank God, she is out of it now!' I said at last,
In a great relief of heart when the thing was done
That had set my soul aghast,
And nothing was left of the picture unsheathed from the past
But the ashen ghost of the card it had figured on.

She was a woman long hid amid the pack of years,
She might have been living or dead; she was lost to my sight,
And the deed that had nigh drawn tears
Was done in a casual clearance of life's arrears;
But I felt as if I had put her to death that night! . . .

Patmore attempted the more difficult task of celebrating married love. He was granted:

> the steady heat
> Of thought wise, splendid, sweet

but again, like Shelley, the impact of feeling is blurred in symbolism and abstraction. So too in Yeats, though the symbolism is of a more romantic, regretful kind. But the theme dies out again in this last poet of love, dies out on a tender, unforced note:

> We sat grown quiet at the name of love;
> We saw the last embers of daylight die,
> And in the trembling blue-green of the sky
> A moon, worn as if it had been a shell
> Washed by time's waters as they rose and fell
> About the stars and broke in days and years.
>
> I had thought for no one's but your ears:
> That you were beautiful, and that I strove
> To love you in the old high way of love;
> That it had all seemed happy, and yet we'd grown
> As weary-hearted as that hollow moon.

4

POETRY AND SENTIMENT

The phase of English poetry we have just dealt with was succeeded by one in which the note of passion was seldom heard—in which, indeed, emotion of any kind was duly restrained. The subject-matter of poetry became 'those feelings which involve an intellectual element or are concerned with ideal objects', a meaning of the word *sentiment* which the Oxford English Dictionary traces to the year 1652. So long as poetry remains poetry, feeling cannot be excluded. The period's confident definition of poetry as 'what oft was thought, but ne'er so well express'd' does at least imply qualitative differences of expression, and though 'well' is an epithet that might suggest exactitude rather than emotional effect, we know that in practice the poets of the seventeenth and eighteenth century were aiming to move their readers, and not merely to convince them. Wit, *true* wit, was the substance of poetry, and that, in the rest of Pope's definition, is described as 'Nature to advantage dress'd'. 'The composition of *all* poems', says Dryden roundly, 'is, or ought to be, of wit;' and then follows his happy metaphor of the nimble spaniel springing its quarry[1]; but without metaphor wit in the poet is 'the faculty of imagination . . . which searches over all the *memory* for the *species or ideas* of those *things* which it designs to represent'. I have italicised the significant words, but their intention is made still clearer in Dryden's later definition (in his preface to *The State of Innocence*, 1677) where wit is defined as 'only this: that it is a propriety of *thoughts* and words; or, in other terms, thoughts and words elegantly adapted to the subject'.

Exactly a hundred years later, in his 'Life' of Cowley, Johnson was still using the word wit in this sense. He admitted that 'like all other things subject by their nature to

[1] Quoted on p. 121 below.

the choice of man', wit has its changes and fashions, and at different times takes different forms. He reproves Pope for depressing wit 'below its natural dignity', for reducing it 'from strength of thought to happiness of language'. The implication throughout Johnson's criticism is that poetry is the expression of thoughts, and though thoughts may be of all degrees, in poetry it is best to keep to such as are 'natural' and 'just'. Of the metaphysical poets in general he complained that 'they had no regard to that *uniformity of sentiment* which enables us to conceive and to excite the pains and the pleasures of other minds: they . . . wrote rather as beholders than partakers of human nature . . . as Epicurean deities making remarks on the actions of men, and the vicissitudes of life, without interest and without emotion. Their courtship was void of fondness, and their lamentation of sorrow. Their wish was only to say what they hoped had never been said before.'

It is true that the word 'emotion' creeps into this passage, which is proof enough that the poets of this period had a wish to move their readers. The question is where we put the emotion—into the writing of poetry, or into the reading of it. There could be no doubt about this in Johnson's (or in Dryden's) mind. Johnson proceeds to reprove the metaphysical poets for their failure to achieve the sublime in poetry, which he defines as 'that comprehension and expanse of *thought* which at once fills the whole mind, and of which the first effect is sudden astonishment, and the second rational admiration'. The thoughtful expression of the poet provokes the awareness or interest of the reader, to the end that he in his turn becomes thoughtful. 'Sublimity is produced by aggregation'—scarcely a passionate process. 'Great thoughts are always general, and consist in positions not limited by exceptions, and in descriptions not descending to minuteness.' And so on.

One must not harry Dr Johnson for a psychological theory of composition. He was content to make clear distinctions between terms, and to use them consistently.

Sentiment was one of his commonest terms. On one page of his life of Cowley we find it used three times: 'genuine wit and useful knowledge . . . may give lustre to works which have more propriety though less copiousness of sentiment'; Jonson's manner resembled that of Donne 'more in the ruggedness of his lines than in the cast of his sentiments'; Cowley had 'as much sentiment, and more musick' than his metaphysical predecessors. The implication is always the same—the substance of poetry is sentiment and sentiment is received opinion, traditional wisdom, 'intercourse with intellectual nature'. Johnson was, in the strict sense of the word, a humanist. He objected to the plan of *Paradise Lost* because 'it comprises neither human actions nor human manners':

'Pleasure and terrour are indeed the genuine sources of poetry; but poetical pleasure must be such as human imagination can at least conceive, and poetical terrour such as human strength and fortitude may combat. The good and evil of Eternity are too ponderous for the wings of wit; the mind sinks under them in passive helplessness, content with calm belief and humble adoration.'

Johnson had mocked Cowley's attempt 'to paint in the number the nature of the thing it describes'. 'The thing is', wrote Cowley, 'that the disposition of words and numbers should be such, as that, out of the order and sound of them, the things themselves may be represented.' Cowley was anticipating, however tentatively, Coleridge's principle of organic form, but that principle depends on the priority of emotion in poetry—emotional or intuitional immediacy—and therefore has no meaning for a practice which began with observation and intellection (the word is Johnson's). If you begin in this way, without immediacy or emotional stress, there is no reason why the form of the poem should not be strictly predetermined by the purpose in view. You begin with the 'fable' or the sentiment; you then decide on the form of composition best suited to it; then on the thoughts which you want to express, and only finally on the

words which express the thoughts and fill the form. The forms are limited in number and precise in shape; but they have been determined by the needs of successive generations of poets, and are various enough. Epic, ode, panegyric, epistle and epitaph, elegy, lyric and sonnet—there is no sentiment worth recording that will not fit with ease into one or other of these 'kinds'. The only problem is to create the appropriate diction. 'Language is the dress of thought; and as the noblest mien, or the most graceful action, would be degraded and obscured by a garb appropriated to the gross employments of rusticks or mechanicks, so the most heroick sentiments will lose their efficacy, and the most splendid ideas drop their magnificence, if they are conveyed by words used commonly upon low and trivial occasions, debased by vulgar mouths, and contaminated by inelegant applications.'

It is not my purpose to criticise the poetry which proceeded from this theory, but to illustrate it. It constitutes such a preponderating bulk of all the verse that has passed into common circulation that we must conclude that it is justified by the great pleasure it gives to a considerable number of people. Proverbial wisdom took to verse as soon as such wisdom ceased to be instinctive—as soon, that is to say, as it had to be memorised. The forms or kinds were elaborated in classical times, and though added to in medieval and romance literature, the seventeenth century preferred the classical models (the 'balade' of Chaucer, a perfect medium for moral sentiments, was not favoured by the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries). The reversion to classical models was part of that new fashion which, if it had meant a pagan liberation for Donne, became a formal subjection in Dryden. Dryden's Essays are the best evidence of this. 'They are part', says their editor,[1] 'of the general effort of the world to come to an understanding with itself about the ideals of literature which had been imposed upon

[1] *Essays of John Dryden*. Ed. W. P. Ker. Oxford, 1900. Vol i, pp. xv–xvi.

it by the learning of the classical scholars. There were exact patterns of different kinds of poetry laid up in some heaven to which the true scholar might rise in his contemplations, and from which he might bring down his knowledge for the instruction of modern poetical artificers.'

Restricted as they were to form, the poets of this period apparently had no inhibitions about length, and most of their poems are too long to quote in a brief survey like this. Incomplete, their form is not apparent; complete it has no fixed dimensions or proportions, except in the sonnet. It is rather like the use of a particular 'order' in architecture: the poet selects his measure, and builds in the style appropriate to the measure. Doric or Corinthian, it may still be a temple. Spenserian stanzas, rhymed alexandrines, unrhymed quatrains—it may still be called an Ode. There is little in common, save the name, between Milton's 'Ode on the Morning of Christ's Nativity', Marvell's 'Horatian Ode upon Cromwell's Return from Ireland', and Collins's Ode 'To Evening'. The Pindaric model was an excuse for endless variations. But we are not really trying to isolate a form: the characteristic of this phase of English poetry is a manner of treating a particular kind of subject-matter. The subject-matter is commonplace (by preference); the treatment is *lapidary* (the word again is Johnson's, though he uses it of blank verse). The aim is to raise the commonplace to an exquisite (rarely to a forceful) memorableness. An early example, in the Roman style, is Henry Howard's lines on 'The Means to Attain Happy Life':

> Martial, the things that do attain
> The happy life, be these, I find:
> The riches left, not got with pain;
> The fruitful ground, the quiet mind:
>
> The equal friend, no grudge, no strife;
> No charge of rule, nor governance;
> Without disease, the healthful life;
> The household of continuance:

The mean diet, no delicate fare;
True wisdom joined with simpleness;
The night discharged of all care,
Where wine the wit may not oppress:

The faithful wife, without debate;
Such sleeps as may beguile the night.
Contented with thine own estate;
Ne wish for Death, ne fear his might.

This is in all essentials the style forever established for such sentiments, and it reached its perfection in Gray's 'Elegy Written in a Country Church-Yard', or in his 'Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College':

To each his sufferings: all are men,
  Condemn'd alike to groan;
The tender for another's pain,
  Th'unfeeling for his own.
Yet, ah! why should they know their fate,
Since sorrow never comes too late,
And happiness too swiftly flies?
Thought would destroy their paradise!
No more—where ignorance is bliss,
  'Tis folly to be wise.

The thought itself, paradoxically recommending us not to think, is of a triteness that would hardly find its way into a parish magazine; but the last two lines have become a proverb, and have become a proverb because this particular thought was ne'er so well expressed. We have to admit that there is an art, or at least an instinct, in the achievement. But at what level, in the hierarchy of literary values, shall we put the invention of a poetic cliché? Gray himself should have known, for as a classical scholar he was familiar with the tragic splendour of Greek poetry. But he was effeminate and he was effete, and he wrote verse to relieve his boredom. Johnson found plenty to criticise in his verse,

but its main fault is its insincerity. All his ahs! and alases! spring, not from feeling, but from affectation. The superiority of his famous 'Elegy' is due to its comparative freedom from affectation.

It is not that we require high seriousness in such verse: indeed, seriousness is best kept to expository prose. It is a sound instinct that demands of poetry, even when it is dealing with solemn or profound subjects, a lightness of touch—the words should be such as lie gently on the notes of a lyre or a lute (even though to the modern poet such notes are only conceived imaginatively). One cannot complain of sentiment in poetry if it is so perfectly wedded to music as in this Song of Dowland's, for instance:

Flow not so fast, ye fountains;
  What needeth all this haste?
Swell not above your mountains,
  Nor spend your time in waste.
Gentle springs, freshly your salt tears
Must still fall dropping from their spheres.

Weep they apace whom Reason
  Or lingering Time can ease.
My sorrow can no Season,
  Nor aught besides, appease.
Gentle springs, freshly your salt tears
Must still fall dropping from their spheres.

Time can abate the terror
  Of every common pain;
But common grief is error,
  True grief will still remain.
Gentle springs, freshly your salt tears
Must still fall dropping from their spheres.

In Herrick, too, the sentiment is nearly always expressed, not merely with wit, but with imagination. Note how the last line of the following lyric lifts the verses into a level of irrational beauty:

Only a little more
I have to write,
Then I'll give o'er,
And bid the world good-night.

'Tis but a flying minute
That I must stay,
Or linger in it;
And then I must away.

O time that cut'st down all
And scarce leav'st here
Memorial
Of any men that were.

How many lie forgot
In vaults beneath?
And piecemeal rot
Without a fame in death?

Behold this living stone
I rear for me,
Ne'er to be thrown
Down, envious Time, by thee.

Pillars let some set up
If so they please:
Here is my hope
And my Pyramides.

The argument might be left there, sentiment in verse being justified when the poet has made it the agent of the beautiful or the sublime, or at least of the lapidary epigram from which a spark or two of wonder may be struck. But in general that is not the style of the poetry of sentiment. A poem like the *Nosce Teipsum* of Sir John Davies is the more regular pattern of it:

When Reason's lamp, which, like the sun in sky,
Throughout man's little world her beams did spread,
Is now become a sparkle, which doth lie
Under the ashes, half extinct, and dead:

How can we hope, that through the eye and ear,
This dying sparkle, in this cloudy place,
Can recollect these beams of knowledge clear,
Which were infused in the first minds by grace?

The date of this is 1599, but it is not fanciful to hear already the precise thought precisely expressed of a Dryden or a Pope. But still more pertinent is the mature Daniel, the Daniel of the *Epistles* (1603). The author of the Sonnets to Delia cannot be accused of a lack of poetic intensity, and he is capable of a playful delicacy (as in the Ode 'Now each creature joys the other'). But in his Epistles he moves on to a different plane of expression, where the fancy is less free and the intensity of another kind.

At this point we should remember Coleridge's defence of the 'well-languaged Daniel' against the charge of prosiness. Coleridge's argument is that there exists, common to both prose and verse, a *neutral ground*, and that Daniel, especially in his *Epistles* and *Hymen's Triumph*, had given perfect expression to it. Coleridge's further observation in a letter to Lamb, that 'thousands of educated men would become more sensible, fitter to be members of Parliament or Ministers, by reading Daniel' would be a poor recommendation now that style has become a mark of class-consciousness. But one has only to turn to a poem like the epistle 'To the Lady Margaret, Countess of Cumberland', to feel that we are in the presence of a mode of poetic expression that is neither artificial nor commonplace, neither flat nor fanciful:

He that of such a height hath built his mind,
And reared the dwelling of his thoughts so strong,
As neither fear nor hope can shake the frame
Of his resolved powers, nor all the wind
Of vanity or malice pierce to wrong
His settled peace, or to disturb the same:
What a fair seat hath he, from whence he may
The boundless wastes and wilds of man survey!

And with how free an eye doth he look down
Upon these lower regions of turmoil,
Where all the storms of passions mainly beat
On flesh and blood; where honour, power, renown,
Are only gay afflictions, golden toil;
Where greatness stands upon as feeble feet,
As frailty doth, and only great doth seem
To little minds, who do it so esteem.

Compare this opening with the opening of a poem expressing similar sentiments, and coming at the end, as Daniel's at the beginning, of this particular phase of English poetry:

Let observation with extensive view,
Survey mankind, from China to Peru;
Remark each anxious toil, each eager strife,
And watch the busy scenes of crowded life;
Then say how hope and fear, desire and hate,
O'erspread with snares the clouded maze of fate,
Where wav'ring man, betray'd by vent'rous pride,
To tread the dreary paths without a guide;
As treach'rous phantoms in the mist delude,
Shuns fancied ills, or chases airy good.
How rarely reason guides the stubborn choice,
Rules the bold hand, or prompts the suppliant voice,
How nations sink, by darling schemes oppress'd,
When vengeance listens to the fool's request.
Fate wings with ev'ry wish th'afflictive dart,
Each gift of nature, and each grace of art,
With fatal heat impetuous courage glows,
With fatal sweetness elocution flows,
Impeachment stops the speaker's pow'rful breath,
And restless fire precipitates on death.

It has been said of Johnson that his verse is poetry partly because it has the virtues of good prose.[1] This observation

[1] By T. S. Eliot in his Introductory Essay to *London: A Poem and The Vanity of Human Wishes*. Haslewood Books, 1930.

would seem to me to fit Daniel far better that it fits Johnson. Of Daniel we can still say, as Coleridge said, that 'the style and language are just such as any very pure and manly writer of the present day . . . would use'; and that seems to me to be a proof of its purity, its freedom from the affectations of a period. Can the same be said of Johnson's verse? There are lines, like the fourth and fifth in the above extract, that are as 'neutral' as any of Daniel's; but Daniel would never have been guilty of the clumsy redundancies of the first two lines, nor of the obscurity of the last one.

Johnson, however, is not representative enough to be a whipping-boy in this lesson. The poetry of sentiment reaches its perfection in Pope, and in Pope we have to acknowledge that the expression, being neither prose nor poetry nor the neutral ground of both, is yet an art.

> Nature to all things fix'd the limits fit,
> And wisely curb'd proud man's pretending wit.
> As on the land while here the ocean gains,
> In other parts it leaves wide sandy plains;
> Thus in the soul while memory prevails,
> The solid pow'r of understanding fails;
> Where beams of warm imagination play,
> The memory's soft figures melt away.
> One science only will one genius fit;
> So vast is art, so narrow human wit:
> Not only bounded to peculiar arts,
> But oft in those confin'd to single parts.
> Like kings we lose the conquests gain'd before,
> By vain ambition still to make them more;
> Each might his sev'ral province well command,
> Would all but stoop to what they understand.

We accept the criticism and with it the form in which it is embodied. The *movement* of the thought is imprisoned in the monotonous litany of the rhymed couplets; the ideas jolt along like a line of railway-trucks, whereas in Daniel, or even in an unappreciated poet like Francis Quarles, they

flow in conversational ease. But Pope so convinces us by his intelligence, his sensibility, his wit, that we are ready to say, with him—

> You'll find, if once the monarch acts the monk,
> Or, cobbler-like, the parson will be drunk,
> Worth makes the man, and want of it, the fellow;
> The rest is all but leather or prunella.

It is only when he attempts themes beyond his 'peculiar art' that the result is not merely artificial, but ludicrous. *Eloisa to Abelard* is a baroque travesty of a gothic theme: the inappropriateness of the medium to the material produces an effect that is merely grotesque:

> Alas, how chang'd! what sudden horrors rise!
> A naked lover bound and bleeding lies!
> Where, where was Eloise? her voice, her hand,
> Her poniard, had oppos'd the dire command.
> Barbarian, stay! that bloody stroke restrain;
> The crime was common, common be the pain.
> I can no more; by shame, by rage suppress'd,
> Let tears, and burning blushes speak the rest.

One has only to recall the actuality of the scene to realise how far from Nature Pope's art could stray. Indeed, it is not the doctrine that is in question:

> First follow Nature, and your judgment frame
> By her just standard, which is still the same:
> Unerring, NATURE, still divinely bright,
> One clear, unchang'd, and universal light,
> Life, force, and beauty, must to all impart,
> At once the source, and end, and test of Art . . .

the doctrine as expressed by Pope was to be repeated by Wordsworth. The question remains: what do they, and every other critic using the term, mean by Nature? One and all mean the particular kind of sensibility they possess. The

eighteenth century, as Mr Eliot has remarked, was cursed with a Pastoral convention and a ruminative mind. It was the ruminative mind that triumphed in the verse of Cowper, Thompson and Young; that was prolonged, early and late, by Wordsworth, and then by his disciple Arnold. It crossed the Atlantic and became the staple of American verse—Emerson, Longfellow, Whittier and Bryant. Keats and Tennyson were deflected from the natural course of their talent by a desire to appear preternaturally profound. Poetic sentiment reaches its lowest level (and its widest diffusion) in the *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, in which passion is reduced to a kind of transcendental nonsense, or, if it is not nonsense, is near to blasphemy. In Robert Browning there is a sudden shift of sensibility. Just as we have seen him rescue the passion of love from an emotional morass, so he lifted thought itself on to a firmer poetic ground. He can still be ruminative— 'Grow old along with me!' and the rest of that kind of sentiment. But the verse again and again engages itself with real intensity of thought. The best of *Paracelsus*, of *Fifine at the Fair*, of *Sordello*, or *The Ring and the Book*, cannot compare with what is wholly characteristic in Donne or Milton; but this 'Prologue' to *Asolando*, published on the day of his death, may stand as a summary of the rugged form and massive import of much of Browning's poetry:

> 'The Poet's age is sad: for why?
> In youth, the natural world could show
> No common object but his eye
> At once involved with alien glow—
> His own soul's iris-bow.
>
> 'And now a flower is just a flower:
> Man, bird, beast are but beast, bird, man—
> Simply themselves, uncinct by dower
> Of dyes which, when life's day began,
> Round each in glory ran.'

Friend, did you need an optic glass,
  Which were your choice? A lens to drape
In ruby, emerald, chrysopras,
  Each object—or reveal its shape
Clear outlined, past escape,

The naked, very thing?—so clear
  That, when you had the chance to gaze,
You found its inmost self appear
  Through outer seeming—truth ablaze,
Not falsehood's fancy-haze?

How many a year, my Asolo,
  Since—one step just from sea to land—
I found you, loved yet feared you so—
  For natural objects seemed to stand
Palpably fire-clothed! No—

No mastery of mine o'er these!
  Terror with beauty, like the Bush
Burning but unconsumed. Bend knees,
  Drop eyes to earthward! Language? Tush!
Silence 'tis awe decrees.

And now? The lambent flame is—where?
  Lost from the naked world: earth, sky,
Hill, vale, tree, flower,—Italia's rare
  O'er-running beauty crowds the eye—
But flame? The Bush is bare.

Hill, vale, tree, flower—they stand distinct,
  Nature to know and name. What then?
A Voice spoke thence which straight unlinked
  Fancy from fact: see, all's in ken:
Has once my eyelid winked?

No, for the purged ear apprehends
  Earth's import, not the eye late dazed:
The Voice said 'Call my works thy friends.
  At Nature dost thou shrink amazed?
God is it who transcends.'

The purged ear is, of course, the ear of thought, of sentiment; and in giving it a higher value than the 'dazed eye' Browning was affirming the superiority of the kind of poetry I have surveyed in this chapter. His own eye was keen—

> The champaign with its endless fleece
> Of feathery grasses everywhere,
> Silence and passion, joy and peace,
> An everlasting wash of air.

But his mind was keener, and by making the depth of his thought the dialectical counterpart of his imagery and linguistic sensibility, he recovered for the poetry of sentiment the philosophic dignity it had so long forfeited.

5

POETRY AND RELIGION

It will not be part of my aim in this chapter to establish any essential connection between poetry and religion. Beliefs or sentiments of any kind never constitute the essence of poetry; they only modify its form. Poetry is primarily a matter of words ('the best words in the best order'), and any particular phase—even the great division between natural and artificial poetry—is mainly the effect of the use of a particular vocabulary. This is well illustrated in the phase which we are now going to study—one of the most remarkable and definite phases in the history of English poetry. Divine poetry had existed in England since the earliest times, but it was either of the visual, narrative type—

> His body is wrapped all in wo,
> Hand and fote he may not go.
> Thy son, lady, that thou lovest so,
> Naked is nailed upon a tree—

or else of a sententious moral nature, always direct in statement:

> Pride is out, and pride is in,
> And pride is rote of every sinne,
> And pride will never blinne,
> Till he hath brought a man in wo.

This pre-humanistic divine poetry is, in fact, related to the ballads with their concreteness and objectivity. The divine poetry of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is completely different: instead of objectivity—the most intense subjectivity; instead of concreteness—allegory, metaphor, and symbolism; all the qualities of indirect poetry.

The development of religion from the thirteenth to the

sixteenth century is such a vast and intricate subject that I do not trust myself to convey any of its general qualities in the few sentences which I must devote to it here. All the poetry of the phase we are dealing with is post-Reformation, and though some of the poets included in the phase were professed Roman Catholics, nevertheless their general tendency was towards Protestantism—a tendency which culminated in Milton, who may be said to close the phase. The actual religious cult of the poet matters little, for the phenomenon we are concerned with is intellectual rather than religious. After all, the difference between Luther or Calvin and their opponents, from the point of view of a latter-day neutrality, is not essentially religious, nor need the Reformation necessarily be regarded as a step in the direction of reason. It is rather the other way about; there is far more intellectual clarity and systematic purity in mediaeval scholasticism than can be found in the emotional ism of a Luther or a Calvin. The greatest contrast in the two attitudes emerges on the question of authority and dogma. The Reformation is perhaps best appreciated as a revolt against the secular power and wealth of the Church, and in this revolt dogmas were seized on because they seemed more tangible and vulnerable than the assumptions and traditions on which the Church based its worldly authority. Dogmas were, at any rate, the outward symbols of authority, and compendious enough to be challenged.

Whilst dogma and assent prevailed, the poet who found inspiration in his religion was very much in the position of the ballad-writer: he was composing for a community of one mind. He identified himself with that community, and had no desire to express a personal point of view. This is one explanation of the close similarity which we have noted between the early divine poetry and the ballads. But once dogma was challenged and assent left to the individual judgment, the character of religious expression no longer remained exclusively communal. But it was still religious, and this implies that the poet still admitted an authority,

though not an intellectual one. Religion represents originally an emotional attitude towards the universe; to refuse to recognise that fact is to rob religion of its significance. Under the Roman Church that emotional attitude had crystallised into a set of dogmas, the most obvious effect of which was to save the individual the wear and tear of an emotional orientation. It was foreseen that man would need a framework for the tendrils of his mind, and the common frailty was provided for. When dogmas were dispensed with (generally as cloaks and catchwords for economic and political changes), religious emotion concentrated on three or four of the cardinal truths of Christianity. Perhaps there was only one cardinal truth, one dogma—God's mercy and loving-kindness. Renunciation of all worldly sentiments through faith in this dogma became the only salvation; the emotional attitude became a fixed one, but never perfectly resolved into intellectual equivalents. The union was still with God, but there was no mediation through reason.

Some such hypothesis is necessary for the understanding of the phase of English poetry with which we are now dealing. It explains the phenomenon of emotional surrender, and it accounts for the poet's subjectivity. He is utterly dependent on God's grace, and his religious duty as a poet is to expound that state of grace by exploring the recesses of his own soul.

When so much has been said, we must halt before committing the fallacy of imagining that there is any necessary connection between divine poetry and the doctrines of the Reformed Church. The Reformation was in its most general aspect a return to seriousness, and in this sense affected the religious consciousness of Protestants and Catholics alike. We need not, in fact, make any sectarian distinction between the poets of this school, because we are more concerned with certain identities in their strictly poetic complexion. That such identities are evidence of something common in their religious experience seems to me to be an

inevitable conclusion, and I would go so far as to say that the difference between two Roman Catholic poets such as Dante and Crashaw is a difference which we can only account for by those very factors which explain the Reformation. Crashaw was an ardent convert to Catholicism, but in his conversion he did not lose the introspective habits of his age, nor its subjective methods of expression.

'The new philosophy calls all in doubt.' Divine or metaphysical poetry begins with doubt. Donne himself, who is the greatest poet of this phase of English poetry, illustrates the fulness of this mental strife, and the intensity of his emotional reaction to the spirit of scepticism wrought an expressive idiom to which all the poets of the metaphysical school were in some measure indebted.

In Donne's particular case the quality of his metaphysical poetry has been generally obscured by the quality of his metaphysical wit. Professor Grierson has traced the history of this confusion in that Introduction to his edition of Donne's *Poetical Works* to which I have already referred more than once,[1] and he there quotes a criticism of De Quincey's which clearly states the distinction between Donne's wit and poetry:

'Few writers have shown a more extraordinary compass of powers than Donne; for he combined what no other man has ever done—the last sublimation of dialectical subtlety and address with the most impassioned majesty. Massy diamonds compose the very substance of his poem on the Metempsychosis, thoughts and descriptions which have the fervent and gloomy sublimity of Ezekiel or Æschylus, whilst a diamond dust of rhetorical brilliancies is strewed over the whole of his occasional verses and his prose.'

Donne's greatest poetry, I have already suggested, is his love poetry: there passion and wit are united in a poetic idiom as original and fascinating as any in the range of English literature. But can we distinguish wit from passion in these lines?—

[1] Oxford: Clarendon Press (1912), vol. ii.

SONG

Sweetest love, I do not goe,
For weariness of thee,
Nor in hope the world can show
A fitter Love for Mee;
But since that I
Must dye at last, 'tis best,
To use my selfe in jest
Thus by fain'd deaths to dye;

Yesternight the Sunne went hence,
And yet is here to day,
He hath no desire nor sense,
Nor halfe so short a way:
Then feare not mee,
But beleeve that I shall make
Speedier journeyes, since I take
More wings and spurres then hee.

. . . . . .

Let not thy divining heart
Forethinke me any ill,
Destiny may take thy part,
And may thy feares fulfill:
But thinke that wee
Are but turn'd aside to sleepe;
They who one another keepe
Alive, ne'er parted bee.

The thought is more intricate than one expects in a love song, but as thought it is subjective enough; it is felt; it is passionate. To be so thoughtful in passion, or so passionate in thought, is to be serious where one is so often trivial, and sincere where one is so often false. The result is a definite originality of idiom, and to confuse such idiom with wit, which is instinctive rather than thoughtful, and heartless rather than passionate, is an elementary mistake of perception. But let us take Donne in a more strictly meta-

physical mood; let us quote from the poem mentioned by De Quincey:

> At every stroake his brazen finnes do take,
> More circles in the broken sea they make
> Then cannons voices, when the aire they teare:
> His ribs are pillars, and his high arch'd roofe
> Of barke that blunts best steele, is thunder-proofe:
> Swimme in him swallow'd Dolphins, without feare,
> And feele no sides, as if his vast wombe were
> Some Inland sea, and ever as hee went
> Hee spouted rivers up, as if he ment
> To joyne our seas, with seas above the firmament.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Now drinkes he up seas, and he eates up flocks,
> He justles Ilands, and he shakes firme rockes.
> Now in a roomefull house this Soule doth float,
> And like a Prince she sends her faculties
> To all her limbes, distant as Provinces.
> The Sunne hath twenty times both crab and goate
> Parched, since first launch'd forth this living boate;
> 'Tis greatest now, and to destruction
> Nearest; There's no pause at perfection;
> Greatnesse a period hath, but hath no station.

Donne is describing the soul's transmigration to a whale, but is there still any distinction between rhetoric and majesty? I do not think there is; there is wit and far-fetched imagery, but this description of Leviathan, like Melville's of two and a half centuries later, is essentially transcendental or majestic. It is not divine, because it is not devout. Donne, except in his later poems, like the *Holy Sonnets* and the hymns *To Christ* and *To God my God, in my Sicknesse*, is scarcely ever devout, because he is always sceptical. But in his sceptical poems he had discovered the union of thought and emotion, and when that emotion changed from doubt (which can be a dreadful emotion) to faith and renunciation, he carried that poetic experience

over with him into his new mental life, and the images and expressions were of the same dialectical subtlety and impassioned majesty:

> At the round earths imagin'd corners, blow
> Your trumpets, Angells, and arise, arise
> From death, you numberlesse infinities
> Of Soules. . . .
>
> Batter my heart, three person'd God. . . .
>
> Since I am comming to that Holy roome,
> Where, with thy Quire of Saints for evermore,
> I shall be made thy Musique; As I come
> I tune the Instrument here at the dore,
> And what I must doe then, thinke here before.

We might in a summary fashion say that Donne gave to English poetry the *words* of scholastic philosophy; it is more than this, because Donne's choice of words was an inspired selection. But he showed conclusively that the material of philosophy was also the material of poetry, and that is the real justification for the name 'metaphysical poetry'. It was in the nature of a discovery for English poetry, though of course it was not a new thing in itself, for Greek and Latin and Italian poetry had shown Donne the way. But Donne was the first to make this possibility evident in English poetry.

Donne did much more than this, but his rhythmical devices, which I have in mind, were not shared by the rest of the metaphysical school. Indeed, they were a great detriment to the contemporary appreciation of Donne, and it is only within the last few years that his metrical experiments have been appreciated at their true worth. Briefly, they may be described as a perception of the independence of rhetorical and musical rhythm, and as a discovery of the possibility of crossing, or making an interplay with, these two rhythmical schemes.

The true type of the divine poet is, I think, Richard Crashaw. This is not to say that he was the best of the company of divine poets to which he belongs, and which includes Herbert, Vaughan, Traherne, and Giles and Phineas Fletcher. From one point of view, George Herbert is more important; he provides the direct link with Donne, and more than any other member of the group shows how the poetry of metaphysical wit can be transmuted into the poetry of religious experience. But he is (in contrast with Crashaw) comparatively simple, and distinguished by a domestic rather than a spiritual imagery. He writes of his 'stock of naturall delights', and of God's 'glorious household-stuffe'. Redemption is illustrated by a suit for 'a new small-rented lease', Patience is the 'square and speckled stone' of the Church-floor, man 'a brittle crazie glasse', and even in that exquisite poem *Vertue* ('Sweet day, so cool, so calm, so bright, the bridal of the earth and skie') there is 'a box where sweets compacted lie', 'season'd timber', and 'coal'. Herbert is not a sentimental poet; in his work he shows that homely images need not necessarily be so debased as more recent poets have made them. His masculine strength is well illustrated in his poem on *Discipline*:

Throw away thy rod,
Throw away thy wrath:
O my God,
Take the gentle path.

For my hearts desire
Unto thine is bent:
I aspire
To a full consent.

Not a word or look
I affect to own,
But by book,
And thy book alone.

Though I fail, I weep:
Though I halt in pace,
Yet I creep
To the throne of grace.

Then let wrath remove;
Love will do the deed:
For with love
Stonie hearts will bleed.

Love is swift of foot;
Love's a man of warre,
And can shoot,
And can hit from farre.

Who can scape his bow?
That which wrought on thee,
Brought thee low,
Needs must work on me.

Throw away thy rod;
Though man frailties hath,
Thou art God:
Throw away thy wrath.

Henry Vaughan has simplicity too, and a stately precision. Professor Grierson has made the clearest possible distinction between these two poets, who are not always easy to distinguish in retrospect. 'The difference between Herbert and Vaughan at his best, is the difference on which Coleridge and Wordsworth dilated between fancy and imagination, between the sensitive and happy discovery of analogies and the imaginative apprehension of emotional identity in diverse experiences, which is the poet's counterpart to the scientific discovery of a common law controlling the most divergent phenomena. . . . Vaughan is a less effective preacher, a far less neat and finished artist than Herbert. His temper is more that of the mystic. . . . It is indeed only in short passages that Vaughan achieves

adequate imaginative vision and utterance, but the spirit of these passages is diffused through his religious verse, more quietistic, less practical, in spirit than Herbert's.'[1]

The effect in diction was greater directness, and a certain speed:

A Ward, and still in bonds, one day
I stole abroad,
It was high-spring, and all the way
Primros'd, and hung with shade;
Yet, was it frost within,
And surly winds
Blasted my infant buds, and sinne
Like Clouds ecclips'd my mind.

Storm'd thus; I straight perceiv'd my spring
Meere stage, and show,
My walke a monstrous, mountain'd thing
Rough-cast with Rocks, and snow;
And as a Pilgrims Eye,
Far from reliefe,
Measures the melancholy skye
Then drops, and rains for griefe,

So sigh'd I upwards still, at last
'Twixt steps, and falls
I reach'd the pinnacle, where plac'd
I found a pair of scales,
I tooke them up and layd
In th' one late paines,
The other smoake, and pleasures weigh'd
But prov'd the heavier graines;

With that, some cryed, *Away;* straight I
Obey'd, and led
Full East, a faire, fresh field could spy,
Some call'd it, *Jacob's Bed*;

[1] Introduction to *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford, 1921), pp. xliv–xlvi.

A Virgin-soile, which no
Rude feet ere trod,
Where (since he stept there,) only go
Prophets, and friends of God.

Four stanzas, but only two sentences, so admirably controlled in rhythm and construction that we are carried along with a smooth delightful ease, and yet the meaning is retained. This poem should be contrasted with more recent masters of ease, such as Swinburne, and it will then be seen that ease is often attained by a sacrifice of succinct meaning and direct narration. We get an ease of sound instead of, as in Vaughan's case, an ease of sense.

Crashaw is at once more passionate and more complex than either Herbert or Vaughan; perhaps he is more complex just because he is more passionate. When passion is directed to a particular object, even though that object be remote or symbolical, then it achieves not complexity, but a dazzling clarity, as in this address to Saint Teresa:

O thou undaunted daughter of desires!
By all thy dower of lights and fires;
By all the eagle in thee, all the dove;
By all thy lives and deaths of love;
By thy large draughts of intellectual day,
And by thy thirsts of love more large than they;
By all thy brim-fill'd bowls of fierce desire,
By thy last morning's draught of liquid fire;
By the full kingdom of that final kiss
That seized thy parting soul, and seal'd thee His;
By all the Heaven that thou hast in Him
(Fair sister of the seraphim!)
By all of Him we have in thee;
Leave nothing of myself in me.
Let me so read thy life, that I
Unto all life of mine may die.

It may be doubted whether there are any lines so sincere and so passionate, and yet so direct and impressive, in the

whole of English poetry. But when instead of a particular object or a symbol, passion is directed to ideas and essences, all the intangible universals of thought or meditation, then the passion drives the poet to the expression of innermost opacities and obscurities. Such complex entities cannot, of course, be expressed in direct language or discourse. The poet resorts to emotional analogies—to words which give, not *meaning* which cannot be given, but an equivalence of tone, of colour, an equivalence of the *pattern* and contour of thought. Even in the relatively simple passage which I have just quoted, there are phrases like 'thy large draughts of intellectual day' and 'the full kingdom of that final kiss' which do not permit a logical analysis; they are inviolate phrases, to be accepted wholly and in that mood of emotional enhancement which the poem induces. The two terms of the metaphor they contain are so fused that no discursive or rational meaning can, or should, be precipitated in the mind of the reader.

When we turn to a poem less objective than the address to Saint Teresa, we find that the emotional apprehension of ideas infects the whole phraseology of the poem. To illustrate this observation I wish to take a poem of Crashaw's which is little quoted, perhaps because of its length, but more likely because of its obscurity. Nevertheless, it is one of the most beautiful of all Crashaw's poems. It is called 'In the Glorious Epiphany of Our Lord: A Hymn sung as by the Three Kings'. I cannot quote it all here; I will quote two or three verses, and then select significant phrases from the rest of the poem.

1*st King*. Bright Babe, Whose awful beauties make
The morn incur a sweet mistake;
2*nd King*. For whom the officious Heavens devise
To disinherit the sun's rise:
3*rd King*. Delicately to displace
The day, and plant it fairer in Thy face.
1*st King*. O Thou born King of loves,

2nd King. Of lights,
3rd King. Of joys,

Chorus. Look up, sweet Babe, look up, and see
For love of Thee
Thus far from home
The East is come
To seek herself in Thy sweet eyes.

1st King. We, who strangely went astray
Lost in a bright
Meridian night,
2nd King. A darkness made of too much day.
3rd King. Beckon'd from far
By Thy fair star,
Lo, at last have found our way.

Chorus. To thee, thou Day of Night, thou East of West,
Lo, we at last have found the way
To Thee the World's great universal East,
The general and indifferent Day.

1st King. All-circling point, all-centring sphere,
The World's one round, eternal year.
2nd King. Whose full and all-unwrinkled face
Nor sinks nor swells with time or place;
3rd King. But every where, and every while
Is one consistent, solid smile.
1st King. Not vex't and tost
2nd King. 'Twixt Spring and frost,
3rd King. Nor by alternate shreds of light,
Sordidly shifting hands with shades and Night.

Chorus. O little All, in Thy embrace
The World lies warm, and likes his place;
Nor does his full globe fail to be
Kiss'd on both his cheeks by Thee.
Time is too narrow for Thy year,
Nor makes the whole World Thy half-sphere.

If we consider the phrases like: 'make the morn incur a

sweet mistake,' 'the officious heavens devise to disinherit', 'delicately to displace', 'who strangely went astray,' 'a bright Meridian night,' 'a darkness made of too much day,' 'Thou East of West', 'the general and indifferent day,' 'in one consistent, solid smile,' 'alternate shreds of light,' 'sordidly shifting hands with shades and Night,' 'Time is too narrow for Thy year'—and many other phrases in the remainder of the poem, such as: 'a more illustrious lie,' 'the white Egypt,' 'the dire face of inferior darkness,' 'kist and courted in the pompous mask of a more specious mist,' 'the deep hypocrisy of Death and Night,' 'we court Thy more concerning smiles,' 'the immodest lust of adulterous godless dust,' 'perverse loves and religious rapes,' 'th' harmonious orbs all mute to us,' 'the great cause of controverted light,' 'their black, but faithful perspective,' 'His new prodigious Night,' 'by the oblique ambush of this close night, Couch'd in that conscious shade, The right-eyed Areopagite Shall with a vigorous guess invade And catch Thy quick reflex,' 'the frugal negative light,' 'a commerce of contrary powers,' 'the pure intelligential prey,' 'by abaséd lids shall learn to be Eagles,' 'the delegated eye of Day,' 'Thy golden index'—these and a thousand other phrases scattered throughout Crashaw's poetry betray a personal idiom of a peculiar intensity. The inventive originality of these phrases *is* their poetry; they are poetic because they are original. But they are original within a certain confined sphere; they are related one to another, and all to the mode of Crashaw's thought. What that mode was is clearly stated in his poems, but never more clearly than in *The Hymn of St Thomas in Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament:*

> With all the powers my poor Heart hath
> Of humble love and loyal Faith,
> Thus low (my hidden life!) I bow to Thee
> Whom too much love hath bow'd more low for me.
> Down, down, proud sense! Discourses die!
> Keep close, my soul's inquiring eye!

Nor touch nor taste must look for more,
But each sit still in his own Dore.

Your ports are all superfluous here,
Save that which lets in faith, the ear.
Faith is my skill, Faith can believe
As fast as love new laws can give.
Faith is my force. Faith strength affords
To keep pace with those pow'rful words.
And words more sure, more sweet, than they,
Love could not think, truth could not say.

This mystical state of being, when sense and discourse are suspended to let in faith for the sake of the skill and the force which faith can give—this state is also the poetic state. In the act of writing his poem the poet enters on a state in which feeling and reasoning are for the moment suspended, and only intuition is operative. This is the explanation of Wordsworth's remark about emotion recollected in tranquillity, and it is common enough to experience an inability to express one's self during the stress of any emotion. That 'stress' is present in all 'events', and is an inhibitive force; thought is inhibited and the body becomes an unconscious mechanism. The event, however, exists in the visual memory, and can be recollected. To recollect and to invest with words—that is the business of all literature; but in the case of poetry, as distinct from prose, there is an act of identification: the mind, in recollecting the event, re-creates the mental conditions of its happening.

'Event', in such a context, has a very wide connotation; the fall of a leaf into a stream, the fall of an empire, the precipitation of a thought in the brain—all these are events with their emotional accompaniments, and all such events are indifferently the subject-matter of poetry. The distinction of the metaphysical school, and the reason why as a school it constitutes such an important phase in the development of English poetry, is that its members for the first time recognised that 'thought' was an 'event' of poetic

significance. A further refinement, especially in the case of Donne, was to recognise that there was often more poetic value in the thought about an emotion than in the emotion itself. This was a real discovery, and explains the cardinal importance of Donne himself in this development. *The Extasie* is the supreme example of this transformation, and all the plainer to see, since the emotion in question is the stock one of love. Donne's followers, more than Donne himself, turned with the same poetic ingenuity from profane to sacred love. The result at its worst was the kind of elaborate conceit which has always shocked the critics of the metaphysical poets; at its best, the ecstasy of religion and of poetry became identified, and nowhere more evidently, as I hope I have shown, than in the poetry of Crashaw.

The trouble was (it always *is* the trouble, once feeling has evolved a form) that this subtle complex of feeling did not last. The tradition persisted, but not the governing emotion. I have no wish to decry the great intelligence, the general felicity and immense achievement of Milton. But to compare his diction with Crashaw's (or with Donne's) is to realise that what he took he polished, and that the lustre which he gave to English verse, though brilliant, is not vital:

> Ring out ye Crystall sphears,
> Once bless our human ears
> (If ye have power to touch our senses so)
> And let your silver chime
> Move in melodious time;
> And let the Base of Heav'ns deep Organ blow,
> And with your ninefold harmony
> Make up full consort to th' Angelike symphony.
>
> For if such holy Song
> Enwrap our fancy long,
> Time will run back, and fetch the age of gold,
> And speckl'd vanity
> Will sicken soon and die,
> And leprous sin will melt from earthly mould,

And Hell it self will pass away,
And leave her dolorous mansions to the peering day.
From *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity*

If polish were a phase (instead of an aspect or reflection) there would be more to say of Milton's poetry, and of the general development of English poetry during the second half of the seventeenth and first half of the eighteenth centuries. Johnson remarked that Milton's style was not modified by his subject, but nevertheless *Samson Agonistes* is a more complex achievement than *Comus* or the Hymn just quoted. But it is a keen observation, for as Milton develops his religious thought in *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, there is no alleviation of his 'Babylonish Dialect'. Milton had perfected, as Mr Eliot has pointed out,[1] a personal poetic diction which is at the farthest possible remove from prose. It is the eccentricity of this style that has made of Milton a bone of rather bitter critical contention. I am so wholly with Mr Eliot in this quarrel (even with the later modifications of his earlier extreme views) that I need not prolong the argument for my own ends. Our *language*, said Addison, sunk under him; and reading this in the context of Johnson's criticism, it was a mistake to assume that Addison meant our poetry or *literature*. He meant no more than that Milton, by what Johnson called his 'perverse and pedantick principle' and his desire 'to use English words with a foreign idiom', had done a certain violence to the structure of the language in order to obtain his admittedly powerful effects. If we admire the effects, we should not question too closely the means that produced them. The mistake is to try and use the same means for different effects, as Keats was to discover. But that is an injunction which we might apply to any personal style—to Shakespeare's, Donne's and certainly to the style of a more recent poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins. Indeed, in so far as

[1] *Milton*, by T. S. Eliot. (Annual lecture on a Master Mind, British Academy, 1947.)

the religious sentiment in poetry is raised to ecstasy, and as such gives rise to a poetry specifically religious, it would seem to issue in very personal accents, as we have seen in all the poets reviewed in this chapter. The community that exists between such poets as Donne, Vaughan, Crashaw, Francis Thompson, and Hopkins, is not primarily doctrinal (there may be enormous differences in this respect, of which I am unaware); it is a community of style reflected from a community of experience:

> The fine delight that fathers thought; the strong
> Spur, live and lancing like the blowpipe flame,
> Breathes once and, quenchèd faster that it came,
> Leaves yet the mind a mother of immortal song.

6

POETRY AND NATURE

It was my first intention to approach the next phase of English poetry under the heading of 'Romanticism', but for many good reasons I have preferred another course. I should, for example, have been bound to give my own definitions of the terms 'romantic' and 'classic', and that might have been a tedious business for my readers. But my more deliberate conclusion was, that the very terms romantic and classic are subjective categories, and that for my purpose I needed something a good deal more positive. Green hills and running brooks, fields and flowers, larks and nightingales—such things may be sentimental, but they are objective, and it is possible to study a poet's reactions to things so definite, whereas to speak of his romanticism or classicism is only to play with counters that have been worn to an indefinite smoothness.

All phases of human thought and feeling are aspects of man's varying relationship to the outer world. He may regard the world about him consciously and find it very definite, or he may live unconscious of any division between self and environment; under a southern sun he will be inclined to think of the world as a pleasant and a friendly place; in the fierce and storm-ridden North he will treat Nature as a hostile force, to be fought and subdued, or feared and propitiated. Again, any of these reactions may be isolated and individual, or they may be diffused and social; in the latter case they may be organised into religions.

English poetry, or rather the ideal prototype from which it descends, is at first impregnated with the gloomy antagonism towards Nature common to all forms of original Northern sensibility. We have seen this aspect of English poetry illustrated in the early religious lyrics. Probably the state of feeling out of which such poetry proceeded was in its

origins a blind and instinctive and perhaps a social reaction, but we need not speculate on that remote problem. By the time English poetry is fully formed and recognisably itself, man's attitude to nature has become conscious and organised, and has submitted, moreover, to many powerful influences from the South, where man's reactions were so much more assentient. These influences came to a head with the Renaissance, and that movement of ideas was so overwhelming, that by the end of the seventeenth century there was little of the primitive left in English thought and sensibility. Nature had been tamed, the sensibilities had been educated, and the mind was sufficiently protected for the growth of an artificial culture. That culture, generally speaking, is the eighteenth century.

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The peculiar virtues of the eighteenth century, from the point of view of art and literature, were due not so much to man's triumph over the forces of Nature (as they were now euphemistically called) as to the skilful way in which he ignored them. Nature in the tooth-and claw sense he dismissed altogether, shutting himself behind the gates of a park or the doors of a coffee-house. Human nature was a different matter, but, except in Swift's sardonic vision, not a matter to despair of. Man himself might be idealised, or ridiculed, or simply described, but in any case he was to be accepted.

The seventeenth century had closed, with Dryden, on what we may call a note of perfect accord between man and Nature. Nature had been tamed, but there it was, a phenomenon of great beauty and an admirable background for the masques and fables of human life. There is no dispensing with Nature altogether; Dryden seems to have realised so much—to have realised that 'it is a terrible business for poetry when it is wholly employed on man or wholly employed on Nature.'[1] And all through it is not a question

[1] Stopford A. Brooke, *Naturalism in English Poetry*, p. 19. An excellent account of the phase of English poetry with which I am dealing in this chapter.

of the poet adopting Nature; Nature is always there, and a town is a poor refuge from her influence. Someone has said that man rots when he loses contact with the native soil—when his feet are separated from the earth by stone pavements and wooden floors. Pope is the poet of polished floors; Dryden still walks on 'well-united sods'. 'Dwarfish wood' and 'matted grass' are still vivid in his poetry; the background is becoming conventional, even theatrical; but it is still felt, and with feeling described:

> When Chanticleer the second Watch had sung,
> Scorning the Scorner Sleep from Bed I sprung.
> And dressing, by the Moon, in loose Array
> Pass'd out in open Air, preventing Day,
> And sought a goodly Grove, as Fancy led my way.
> Strait as a line in beauteous Order stood
> Of Oaks unshorn a venerable Wood;
> Fresh was the Grass beneath, and ev'ry Tree,
> At distance planted in a due degree,
> Their branching Arms in Air with equal space
> Stretch'd to their Neighbours with a long Embrace:
> And the new leaves on ev'ry Bough were seen,
> Some ruddy-colour'd, some of lighter green.
> The painted Birds, Companions of the Spring,
> Hopping from Spray to Spray, were heard to sing;
> Both Eyes and Ears receiv'd a like Delight,
> Enchanting Musick, and a charming Sight.
>
> From *The Flower and the Leaf*

Dryden's *Fables* were published in 1700. In 1704, at the age of sixteen, Pope wrote his *Pastorals*:

> A Shepherd's Boy (he seeks no better name)
> Led forth his flocks along the silver Thame,
> Where dancing sun-beams on the waters play'd,
> And verdant alders form'd a quiv'ring shade.
> Soft as he mourn'd, the streams forgot to flow,
> The flocks around a dumb compassion show,

The Naiads wept in ev'ry wat'ry bow'r,
And Jove consented in a silent show'r.

Pope's virtues, which are very great, belong to a sphere which is scarcely poetical in the limited meaning given to poetry for the purpose of this survey. They belong to the sphere which Dryden called 'wit-writing', and in that sphere they are unrivalled. His name is only invoked here, and his verses quoted, to represent the farthest flight from that imaginative understanding of Nature which is one of the characteristics of the true poet. Wit is a very civilised accomplishment, and is typical of highly civilised societies. Are we then to conclude that poetry and civilisation cannot exist together? I think we must, but we must also remember that civilisation is not the same thing as culture. The only characteristic they have in common is intelligence, and as a poetry of intelligence it would be possible to find a place for a good deal of Pope, as for most of Dryden.

Pope, then, is the apogee of this phase of English poetry; its perigee is Wordsworth. A distance of less than a hundred years separated these two poets, and yet they seem to belong to different worlds. They *do* belong to different worlds, but it is still possible to trace a line of development which unites them. They stand at opposite ends of a spectrum, but the intervening colours merge almost insensibly into one another. Stopford Brooke has observed that

'The distance in time between the last poems of Pope and the first of Wordsworth was nearly sixty years. During that time, and including the *Lyrical Ballads*, the spirit, method, manner, metre, melody, and the passion of poetry had suffered a complete and vital change. And the end the poets proposed to themselves in making poetry, and their conception of its origin and sources, were radically different from what they had been in the days of Dryden and Pope. Indeed, the change began before Pope's death, about the middle of his career. Even then, the reaction which brought us to Blake, Wordsworth, and Coleridge took its rise. It was

a reaction which, caused by a weariness of artificial and conventional poetry, went back, in order to draw new life into poetry, to simple human nature, and to Nature herself as seen in her wild and uncultivated beauty.'[1]

The only point I object to in this brief statement of the rise of naturalism in English poetry is the phrase 'went back'. Wordsworth in particular went forward—forward to a different and a deeper comprehension of the meaning of life than had ever existed in English poetry. But though the feeling for nature in Wordsworth's poetry was profounder than that of any other poet in the history of English poetry, and though there is a definite originality in his thought (as I shall presently show in more detail), nevertheless the more one explores the minor poetry of the eighteenth century, the more conscious one becomes of the gradual growth of a general state of sensibility, of which Wordsworth was the supreme expression. I shall not trace this growth in detail here; that work has been admirably done by Stopford Brooke in the book I have already cited, and by several scholarly hands.[2] In a general view of this historical process we at first see Nature set entirely apart, a flat and lifeless back-cloth against which the drama of human actions is played. The poet may turn to this irrelevant tapestry for a similitude or a parable, but the reference is casual and often enough inaccurate. There is no sense of unity, of community, of significance. Then during the eighteenth century the poet begins to feel that this background to human life has a certain value—a static beauty of its own, which he decides to call 'picturesque'. He studies Nature with more care; he makes exact, objective descriptions of her features and phases. This objective study of Nature led to a certain sympathetic understanding of natural forces; man became, as it were, but one element in the play of these forces.

[1] Op. cit., p. 1.

[2] See in particular *The Treatment of Nature in English Poetry*, by Myra Reynolds (University of Chicago Press, 1909), which has a full bibliography.

The most influential poet of this development was James Thomson. Thomson was a Scotsman, and, according to Stopford Brooke, *The Seasons* is a child of Scottish poetry:

'Robert Henryson in the fifteenth century, William Dunbar at the beginning of the sixteenth, Gawin Douglass in the same century but later, all described the scenery of their own country with close accuracy, with their eye on the objects described; without any conventionality save a touch of Chaucer's method; with an extraordinary love of colour, and with an evident love of what they saw . . . this love of Nature somewhat decayed in Scotland during the furious political and religious strifes of the age of the Stuarts, but it emerged again in Allan Ramsay, who was a pure Naturalist, both as regards human nature, and Nature herself—and now it appeared in Thomson, who was born in Roxburghshire and educated in Edinburgh. The Celtic spirit came to London with him, and has moved ever since in English verse when it treats of natural scenery.

Much of Thomson's poetry is vigorous and impressive in a theatrical way, but I cannot bring myself to admit that there is anything 'actual' about it, or that its importance is more than historical. A fair specimen is this passage from *Winter*:

> Muttering, the winds at eve, with blunted point,
> Blow hollow-blustering from the south. Subdued,
> The frost resolves into a trickling thaw.
> Spotted the mountains shine: loose sleet descends,
> And floods the country round. The rivers swell,
> Of bonds impatient. Sudden from the hills,
> O'er rocks and woods, in broad brown cataracts,
> A thousand snow-fed torrents shoot at once;
> And where they rush, the wide-resounding plain
> Is left one slimy waste. Those sullen seas,
> That wash'd th' ungenial pole, will rest no more
> Beneath the shackles of the mighty north;
> But, rousing all their waves, resistless heave.
> And hark! the lengthening roar continuous runs

Athwart the rifted deep: at once it bursts,
And piles a thousand mountains to the clouds.

How all this flashy word-painting shrinks to insignificance by the side of Shakespeare's realistic intimacy:

When icicles hang by the wall,
And Dick the shepherd blows his nail,
And Tom bears logs into the hall,
And milk comes frozen home in pail,
When blood is nipped, and ways be foul, . . .

Nor will Thomson's philosophy of Nature bear any close examination. The *Hymn* with which he concludes *The Seasons* is an honest effort to express such a philosophy, and has enough sincerity to be impressive. But nature is conceived as a vast canvas with God as a bravura landscape painter, whose seeming improvisations are revealed as the ordered expression of an eighteenth-century mind:

Mysterious round! what skill, what force divine,
Deep felt, in these appear! a simple train,
Yet so delightful mix'd, with such kind art,
Such beauty and beneficence combined;
Shade, unperceived, so softening into shade;
And all so forming an harmonious whole;
That, as they still succeed, they ravish still.

If the scope of this outline allowed it, I should have liked to differentiate, in this growth of the naturalistic impulse in English poetry, the various contributions of Collins and Gray, of Crabbe and Cowper. The development of each of these poets, though for different reasons, was in the direction of simplicity—the restrained, classical simplicity of Collins and Gray, the intimate and realistic simplicity of Crabbe and Cowper. What the former tendency could achieve is to be seen in Collins's *Ode to Evening*—the most amazing as it is certainly the most beautiful poem of the eighteenth century; amazing because Collins's devotion to classical purity has, a

few conventional phrases apart, led him to adopt a sincerity of expression (rejecting rhyme and conventional metre) that reaches forward to the modern ideal:

If aught of oaten stop, or pastoral song,
May hope, chaste Eve, to sooth thy modest ear,
Like thy own solemn springs,
Thy springs, and dying gales,
O nymph reserv'd, while now the bright-hair'd sun
Sits in yon western tent, whose cloudy skirts,
With brede ethereal wove,
O'erhang his wavy bed:
Now air is hush'd, save where the weak-ey'd bat
With short shrill shriek, flits by on leathern wing;
Or where the beetle winds
His small but sullen horn,
As oft he rises 'midst the twilight path,
Against the pilgrim borne in heedless hum:
Now teach me, maid compos'd,
To breathe some soften'd strain,
Whose numbers stealing through thy dark'ning vale,
May not unseemly with its stillness suit,
As, musing slow, I hail
Thy genial lov'd return!

For when thy folding star arising shews
His paly circlet, at his warning lamp
The fragrant Hours, and Elves
Who slept in flow'rs the day,
And many a nymph who wreathes her brow with sedge,
And sheds the fresh'ning dew, and, lovelier still,
The pensive Pleasures sweet
Prepare thy shadowy car.

Then lead, calm Vot'ress, where some sheety lake,
Cheers the lone heath, or some time-hallow'd pile,
Or up-land fallows grey
Reflects its last cool gleam.

But when chill blust'ring winds, or driving rain,
Forbid my willing feet, be mine the hut
That from the mountain's side
Views wilds and swelling floods,
And hamlets brown, and dim-discover'd spires,
And hears their simple bell, and marks o'er all
Thy dewy fingers draw
The gradual dusky veil.

While Spring shall pour his show'rs, as oft he wont,
And bathe thy breathing tresses, meekest Eve!
While Summer loves to sport
Beneath thy ling'ring light;
While sallow Autumn fills thy lap with leaves,
Or Winter yelling thro' the troublous air,
Affrights thy shrinking train,
And rudely rends thy robes;
So long sure-found beneath thy sylvan shed,
Shall Fancy, Friendship, Science, rose-lip'd health,
Thy gentlest influence own,
And hymn thy fav'rite name!

Cowper is significant for his more subjective contemplation of Nature. Wordsworth must have read deeply in Cowper, and must have been influenced profoundly. In many passages Cowper seems to anticipate the peculiar philosophy of Wordsworth, to see 'a soul in all things, and that soul is God'. But his genius was not strong enough, his mind not active enough, to pursue his dim intuitions to their definite consequences. That would have involved him in an originality which his fragile brain could never support. Like his life, his poetry is an affair of lucid intervals—how lucid and illuminating I cannot better illustrate than by these pleasant lines from *The Task:*

The night was winter in his roughest mood,
The morning sharp and clear. But now at noon
Upon the southern side of the slant hills,
And where the woods fence off the northern blast,

The season smiles, resigning all its rage,
And has the warmth of May. The vault is blue
Without a cloud, and white without a speck
The dazzling splendour of the scene below.
Again the harmony comes o'er the vale,
And through the trees I view the embattled tower
Whence all the music. I again perceive
The soothing influence of the wafted strains,
And settle in soft musings as I tread
The walk, still verdant, under oaks and elms,
Whose outspread branches overarch the glade.
The roof, though movable through all its length
As the wind sways it, has yet well sufficed,
And intercepting in their silent fall
The frequent flakes, has kept a path for me.
No voice is here, or none that hinders thought.
The redbreast warbles still, but is content
With slender notes, and more than half suppressed:
Pleased with his solitude, and flitting light
From spray to spray, where'er he rests he shakes
From many a twig the pendent drops of ice,
That tinkle in the withered leaves below.
Stillness, accompanied with sounds so soft,
Charms more than silence. Meditation here,
May think down hours to moments. Here the heart
May give a useful lesson to the head,
And learning wiser grow without his books.

The Task, Book VI

Crabbe could be more forceful than this, and his influence on Wordsworth was probably equally profound, and more immediate and contemporary. His careful and persistent realism is not often appreciated at its true worth, and it would have been interesting to consider it in more detail, if it had more directly concerned the main subject of this chapter.

The slow recognition of the essential unity between man

and Nature was not confined to a few major poets like those I have mentioned, but was a general diffusion throughout the poetic consciousness of the time. A remarkable example in a minor poet is an undated *Fragment of a Rhapsody written at the Lakes of Westmoreland* by John Brown, who died four years before Wordsworth was born:

> Now sunk the sun, now twilight sunk, and night
> Rode in her zenith; nor a passing breeze
> Sigh'd to the groves, which in the midnight air
> Stood motionless; and in the peaceful floods
> Inverted hung; for now the billow slept
> Along the shore, nor heav'd the deep, but spread
> A shining mirror to the moon's pale orb,
> Which, dim and waning, o'er the shadowy cliffs,
> The solemn woods and spiry mountain tops
> Her glimmering faintness threw. Now every eye
> Oppress'd with toil, was drown'd in deep repose,
> Save that the unseen shepherd in his watch,
> Propt on his crook, stood listening by the fold,
> And gazed the starry vault and pendant moon.
> Nor voice nor sound broke on the deep serene
> But the soft murmur of swift gushing rills
> Forth issuing from the mountain's distant steep
> (Unheard till now, and now scarce heard) proclaimed
> All things at rest, and imag'd the still voice
> Of quiet whispering to the ear of night.[1]

There is nothing, however, in all these anticipations of Wordsworth that in any way makes Wordsworth the natural product of his period, or the mere summation of the poetry which preceded him. Wordsworth took a deeper breath, and a wilder leap into the 'dark abyss' of thought, and returned to face the world with a faith as daring and as consequential as any since Milton's. The history of that experience is related in *The Prelude*, a poem which has fair claims to be regarded as the greatest poem of the age; it is the only

[1] Quoted by Myra Reynolds, op. cit., p. 148.

poem, at any rate, which stands in relation to the modern age as Dante's *Divine Comedy* stands to the Middle Ages. It expresses the age; and its incompleteness, and, if admitted, its incoherence, are qualities pertaining to the age rather than to the poet.

Before passing on to an examination of the significance of Wordsworth's poetry, let us be quite forthright about its technical merits. Wordsworth was not only a great 'seer'; he was also a most marvellous 'fashioner'. We shall in the next chapter examine the question of 'pure' poetry; I will give it as my opinion now, that if we were to grant the independence of poetic music or magic, then no poet is so rich in these qualities as Wordsworth. He had the capacity of endowing words of the most commonplace associations with the light or radiant emanation of ideal glory. The most perfect example of this supernal strain is, in my own opinion, the poem called *The Solitary Reaper*, which poem I would always send out into the world of letters to represent the quintessence of English poetry:

Behold her, single in the field,
Yon solitary Highland Lass!
Reaping and singing by herself;
Stop here, or gently pass!
Alone she cuts, and binds the grain,
And sings a melancholy strain;
O listen! for the vale profound
Is overflowing with the sound.

No Nightingale did ever chant
So sweetly to reposing bands
Of Travellers in some shady haunt,
Among Arabian sands:
A voice so thrilling ne'er was heard
In spring-time from the Cuckoo-bird,
Breaking the silence of the seas
Among the farthest Hebrides.

Will no one tell me what she sings?
Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow
For old, unhappy, far-off things,
And battles long ago:
Or is it some more humble lay,
Familiar matter of to-day?
Some natural sorrow, loss, or pain,
That has been, and may be again!

Whate'er the theme, the Maiden sang
As if her song could have no ending;
I saw her singing at her work,
And o'er the sickle bending;—
I listened till I had my fill,
And when I mounted up the hill,
The music in my heart I bore,
Long after it was heard no more.

Such felicity is characteristic of Wordsworth's successful poetry; it is in no way discounted by his abominable lapses, due to writing too much and too often, and generally to taking too vocational a view of his talent. But there is in Wordsworth, besides this poetic felicity, a personal idiom of the same intensity as that which we noticed in Crashaw's case.[1] The cause is the same in both. Wordsworth attained towards Nature the same kind of mystical faith that Crashaw attained towards his God, and this faith was an ecstatic mode of contemplation which can be identified with poetic inspiration. It is the mood induced by worship, but by worship intense beyond the conception of normal minds.

[1] The intensity is the same, but the phraseology is, of course, that of a different mentality. Phrases like 'apparelled in celestial light', 'the vision splendid,' 'espouse the everlasting Sea,' 'transmuted to a sullen fire,' 'the Mind's internal heaven'—such phrases, selected at random from hundreds of their kind, are not unlike the phrases quoted from Crashaw on pp. 92–3. But in phrases like 'joy in widest commonalty spread', 'the fierce confederate storm', 'earth's diurnal course,' 'the silence and the calm of mute insensate things,' 'a sense sublime of something

Wordsworth more than once describes in quite an objective and dispassionate way the access of these emotional states—as, for example, in a note to the *Ode: Intimations of Immortality*:

'I was often unable to think of external things as having external existence, and I communed with all that I saw as something not apart from, but inherent in, my own immaterial nature. Many times while going to school have I grasped at a wall or tree to recall myself from this abyss of idealism to the reality. At that time I was afraid of such processes.'

He conquered his fear of such processes by objectifying them, and the objectivation was his poetry. There was in Wordsworth always this intense struggle to find objective expression for his intensely subjective feelings. That is the whole secret of his nature and of the greatness of his poetry. Instead of a wall or a tree, he grasped at words as definite as walls or trees, and with these words recalled himself from the abyss of idealism. In the process he lived through the most essential of poetic experiences.

In *The Prelude* the exact nature of Wordsworth's sensibility is made clear, and we see in what way it differed from other poets' sensibilities, and from the general state of mind expressed by poets of other ages. In the Northern attitude towards Nature there has always been an element of passion—originally of passionate aversion. I have already referred to the typical expression of this attitude in the Anglo-Saxon *Seafarer*. In Shakespeare this attitude has become one of passionate understanding—neither aversion

far more deeply interfused', phrases which are peculiarly Wordsworth's own, words have become poetic that were never poetic before—words like 'commonalty', 'confederate', 'diurnal,' 'insensate', and 'interfused'. Wordsworth, perhaps more than any other English poet, shows that the vocabulary of logical thought has the same poetic possibilities as the vocabulary of lyrical sensation. I have already quoted (p. 73) Coleridge's remarks on the 'neutral style' in English poetry, of which he held Wordsworth, no less than Daniel, to be an exponent.

nor sympathy, but most exact comprehension. Then in the eighteenth-century attitude we have the assumption of indifference; there was neither understanding, nor sympathy, nor aversion (except of the induced classical kind). It was a state of false security. Wordsworth once more recovered the true Northern attitude, but it was now endowed with the passion that seeks to conquer by identification, by absorption, by the attainment of a unity of spirit. The emotional reaction which is the constant element in the Northern relationship with nature has been transmuted from the strongest aversion to the strongest attraction:

> Wisdom and Spirit of the universe!
> Thou Soul that art the eternity of thought,
> That givest to forms and images a breath
> And everlasting motion, not in vain
> By day or star-light thus from my first dawn
> Of childhood didst thou intertwine for me
> The passions that build up our human soul;
> Not with the mean and vulgar works of man,
> But with high objects, with enduring things—
> With life and nature, purifying thus
> The elements of feeling and of thought,
> And sanctifying, by such discipline,
> Both pain and fear, until we recognise
> A grandeur in the beatings of the heart.
> Nor was this fellowship vouchsafed to me
> With stinted kindness. In November days,
> When vapours rolling down the valley made
> A lonely scene more lonesome, among woods,
> At noon and 'mid the calm of summer nights,
> When, by the margin of the trembling lake,
> Beneath the gloomy hills homeward I went
> In solitude, such intercourse was mine;
> Mine was it in the fields both day and night,
> And by the waters, all the summer long.
>
> *The Prelude*, Book I

The essence of this doctrine, and the meaning of this poetic faith, is lost if it is interpreted as a merely descriptive power, as some kind of sympathetic magic, or even as the kind of understanding peculiar to Shakespeare. It is something more profound than that—a faith that needs an echo of Crashaw's words to define it:

> Faith is my force. Faith strength affords
> To keep pace with those pow'rful words.
> And words more sure, more sweet, than they,
> Love could not think, truth could not say.

That faiths so different should find expression in one language and within the range of one poetry is a marvel, but also a reminder that faith is expressed permanently only in some form of art—above all in poetry. Crashaw's transcendent God, Wordsworth's immanent spirit of the Universe, are perhaps the noblest religious ideals ever formulated in the history of English thought; and yet they are but aspects of poetic experience.

7

PURE POETRY

So far the phases we have dealt with have been historical; they have been more or less confined to a definite period of time, and can be correlated with corresponding social phases. It is true that the ballads belong to a very vague period, and that there is authentic ballad poetry in almost all ages. But the later examples of ballad poetry spring out of special circumstances which re-create for a moment the conditions of an age when such poetry was communal. Nor is there anything impossible in the re-creation, in individual instances, of the particular characteristics of the other phases we have dealt with: Beddoes, Francis Thompson, and C. M. Doughty are instances of authentic feeling resorting to the modes of a past historical phase.

The phase I now propose to outline runs across all historical divisions. It is a vertical cut through the several layers of our national poetry. It would be possible to hold that it is therefore no phase at all, but an essential element of poetry in general. I myself am not prepared, however, to take such a view.

I shall approach the subject by way of a discussion which made a great stir in the French critical reviews of about twenty years ago. A type of poetry, which is almost the essential type of English poetry, has grown into prominence in France only during the last two or three generations: it began with Verlaine and Mallarmé and has ended with Paul Valéry. To explain this new type of poetry the French have evolved a theory which had been a commonplace of English criticism for centuries. With their aptitude for such matters, the French critics have given precision to the whole problem, and where the English poets and critics have dropped casual but profound asides, they have picked up all these loose threads and woven them into a coherent system.

The texts of the debate are English. There is Walter Pater's remark that:

'All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music; and the perfection of poetry seems to depend in part on a certain suppression of mere subject, so that the meaning reaches us through ways not distinctly traceable by the understanding.'

There are various texts of Poe's, such as:

'It is in music, perhaps, that the soul most nearly attains the great end for which, when inspired by the poetic sentiment, it struggles—the creation of supreme beauty. It *may* be, indeed, that here this sublime end is, now and then, attained *in fact*. We are often made to feel, with a shivering delight, that from an earthly harp are stricken notes which *cannot* have been unfamiliar to the angels. And thus there can be little doubt that in the union of poetry with music in its popular sense, we shall find the widest field for the poetic development. . . .—*The Poetic Principle* (1844).

'Music, when combined with a pleasurable idea, is poetry; music, without the idea, is simply music; the idea, without the music, is prose, from its very definiteness.'—*Letter to B——* (1836).

'It has been assumed, tacitly and avowedly, directly and indirectly, that the ultimate object of all poetry is truth Every poem, it is said, should inculcate a moral; and by this moral is the poetical merit of the work to be adjudged. . . . We have taken it into our heads that to write a poem simply for the poem's sake, and to acknowledge such to have been our design, would be to confess ourselves radically wanting in the true poetic dignity and force—but the simple fact is, that, would we but permit ourselves to look into our own souls, we should immediately there discover that under the sun there neither exists nor *can* exist any work more thoroughly dignified—more supremely noble than this very poem—the poem *per se*—this poem which is a poem and nothing more—this poem written solely for the poem's sake.'—*The Poetic Principle*.

And before this Shelley had observed that:

'Sounds as well as thoughts have relation both between each other and towards that which they represent, and a perception of the order of those relations has always been found connected with a perception of the order of the relations of thoughts. Hence the language of poets has ever affected a certain uniform and harmonious recurrence of sound, without which it were not poetry, and which is scarcely less indispensable to the communication of its influence than the words themselves, without reference to that peculiar order.'—*Defence of Poetry* (1821).

The more recent debate in France, which derives from the French devotion to Poe, has been summarised by the Abbé Bremond in a volume which he has published in collaboration with M. Robert de Souza.[1] The Abbé Bremond quotes several of the most famous lines of French poetry, lines like:

> Le prince d'Aquitaine à la tour abolie.
>
> GERARD DE NERVAL

> Et les fruits passeront la promesse des fleurs.
>
> MALHERBE

> La fille de Minos et de Pasiphaë. RACINE

and asks his reader to analyse the effect of such poetry. He concludes that the effect is one of the music of words (*musique verbale*), transmitting a certain 'fugitive vibration' or 'suggestive magic' which leads us into ourselves, into that 'awful warmth about my heart, like a load of immortality', of which Keats wrote, and which the Abbé identifies

[1] *La Poésie Pure*, par Henri Bremond, de l'Académie Française, avec *Un Débat sur la Poésie*, par Robert de Souza (Paris: Grasset, 1926). A more recent, and a more decisive discussion of the whole subject is to be found in Thierry Maulnier's introduction to his anthology *Introduction à la poésie française*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1939).

with the act of prayer—'that august retreat where we await, where we call on, a presence more than human'.

This theory of the identity of poetry and prayer is the Abbé's own particular contribution to the debate. Elsewhere he is mainly concerned with the analysis of such effects as are secured by such lines as those quoted. Is it merely the music of the words (their actual sound), or the images they suggest (their signification), or the ideas they express (their meaning), which constitute their poetic value? Are we to accept Flaubert's dictum, that a good line which means nothing is superior to a line less good which means something, with its corollary that whatever makes poetry it is not the sense of it? And if so, with what precision can we define the qualities of good poetry?

M. de Souza, in the volume referred to, has reduced the Abbé's doctrine to six essential notions:

'1. Every poem owes its essentially poetical character to the presence of a mysterious and unifying reality.'

'2. To read a poem poetically, it does not suffice, and even is not always necessary, to seize the sense. There is an obscure enchantment independent of the sense.'

'3. Poetry cannot be reduced to rational discourse; it is a mode of expression which surpasses the normal forms of discourse.'*

'4. Poetry is a certain kind of music, but not music merely for it acts as the conductor of a current which transmits the intimate nature of the soul.'

'5. It is an incantation that gives unconscious expression to the state of soul in which the poet exists before he expresses himself in ideas or sentiments. We relive in the poem

* Cf. Maulnier, loc. cit., 'Le seul véritable problème est de savoir *pourquoi* la poésie est présente dans dix syllables de Scève ou dans quatre mots de Racine; il n'est pas près d'être résolu; il n'est pas prouvé qu'il puisse l'être; la poésie étant cet *autre* pouvoir de langage, qui dépasse, par nature le pouvoir d'explication, on ne voit point qu'elle puisse se laisser réduire en termes d'explication'.

that confused experience, which is inaccessible to distinct consciousness. The words of prose excite, stimulate, cap our ordinary activities; the words of poetry appease them, tend to suspend them.'

'6. Poetry is a mystic magic allied to prayer.'

There is here, you will see, little of the French *clarté* and *netteté* which we have been taught to accept as a commonplace of French criticism, and that is perhaps why the doctrines of the Abbé Bremond have caused such a stir. His leading antagonist is M. Paul Souday, a typical French rationalist and cynic. It is also amusing to note that Paul Valéry is in the opposite camp—a fact very disconcerting to the Abbé, leading him to dub Valéry a poet in spite of himself—*malgré lui*; for if ever there was an example of the pure poet, Paul Valéry is he. But Valéry prefers to compare a poem to a game of chess or a mathematical problem—to anything but magic and prayer.

The rationalist does not deny the inordinate appeal of such lines as 'La fille de Minos et de Pasiphaë'; he merely explains them as sonorous chords of vowels and consonants which awaken in us a pleasurable state. Either such lines have a meaning and then the music enhances the meaning, or they are meaningless and the effect is merely one of verbal music.

Now a great deal of English poetry is of the type that the Abbé Bremond calls 'pure' (the phrase is actually Baudelaire's). The Abbé's six points might more easily be justified by an analysis of the poetry of Shakespeare, Herrick, Burns, Shelley, Keats, and Poe than by any appeal to the French symbolists and their successors. And in fact the Abbé Bremond relies on English poetry a good deal in the course of his argument. Before discussing the matter further, let us select a few English equivalents for the verses cited in *La Poésie Pure*:

Childe Roland to the Dark Tower came . . .

Now lies the Earth all Danaë to the stars . . .

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree:
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man,
  Down to a sunless sea.

Tyger, Tyger, burning bright
In the forests of the night.

No Spring, nor Summer Beauty hath such grace,
As I have seen in one Autumnal face.

Deep in the shady sadness of a vale
Far sunken from the healthy breath of morn,
Far from the fiery noon, and eve's one star,
Sat grey-hair'd Saturn, quiet as a stone,
Still as the silence round about his lair;
Forest on forest hung about his head
Like cloud on cloud. No stir of air was there,
Not so much life as on a summer's day
Robs not one light seed from the feather'd grass,
But where the dead leaf fell, there did it rest.
A stream went voiceless by, still deaden'd more
By reason of his fallen divinity
Spreading a shade: the Naiad 'mid her reeds
Press'd her cold finger closer to her lips . . .

The sun descending in the West,
  The evening star doth shine;
The birds are silent in their nest,
  And I must seek for mine.

A widow bird sate mourning for her love
  Upon a wintry bough;
The frozen wind crept on above,
  The freezing stream below.
There was no leaf upon the forest bare,
  No flower upon the ground,
And little motion in the air,
  Except the mill-wheel's sound.

He is dead and gone, lady,
He is dead and gone;
At his head a grass-green turf,
At his heels a stone.

The still, sad music of humanity . . . .

We have here a great variety of effects, all undeniably poetic, and commonly acknowledged as such. None of them is perhaps quite so empty of content as 'La fille de Minos et de Pasiphaë', though the first line of the third quotation is a fair equivalent. But all have poetic music in singular clearness, and all express something more than the mere prose sense of the words.

I would like to suggest that the elements of poetry can be reduced to three, and that the mark of a great poet, a major as distinct from a minor poet, is the capacity of combining all three elements in one poem. The three elements may be distinguished as sound, sense, and suggestion.[1] Sound would include all those purely musical qualities which arise from the happy combination of vocables—of vowels and consonants in association. Theoretically, but only theoretically, such music may be the sole aim of poetry, but in that case we are reduced to clever jokes like Lewis Carroll's verse:

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe . . .

or to what is not very far removed from such nonsense verse, much of the poetry of Swinburne:

Ah sweet, and sweet again, and seven times sweet,
The paces and the pauses of thy feet!
Ah sweeter than all sleep or summer air,
The fallen fillets fragrant from thine hair!

[1] These words perhaps echo Milton's "simple, sensuous and impassioned', which Coleridge paraphrased as 'single in conception, abounding in sensible images, and informing them all with the spirit of the mind'. (*Table Talk.*)

But, it may be objected, the musical sounds of Lewis Carroll's verse are very suggestive; it may be nonsense, but it gives one a thrill. And need we care for anything else in Swinburne's poetry so long as we are filled with a sense of musical delight?

The objection holds good, but only because (I would maintain) the sense of musical delight is allied to a higher faculty. It is, in Coleridge's words, 'a gift of imagination':

'. . . the sense of musical delight, with the power of producing it, is a gift of imagination; and this, together with the power of reducing multitude into unity of effect, and modifying a series of thoughts by some one predominant thought or feeling, may be cultivated and improved, but can never be learned. It is in these that *Poeta nascitur, non fit*.'—*Literary Remains*.

I have extended this quotation from Coleridge because I believe it contains the key to the whole question. Let us, however, first examine the other two elements of poetry.

That sense alone, or rather, sense without further qualification, cannot be poetry, is a truism. But is it so certain that sense, devoid of the musical element in poetry, cannot yet remain poetry? I do not think it is. This is the old question of wit-writing, which was posed so well by Dryden in his preface to *Annus Mirabilis*:

'The composition of all poems is, or ought to be, of wit; and wit in the poet, or *wit-writing* (if you will give me leave to use a school-distinction) is no other than the faculty of imagination in the writer, which, like a nimble spaniel, beats over and ranges through the field of memory, till it springs the quarry it hunted after; or without metaphor, which searches over all the memory for the species or ideas of those things which it designs to represent.'

I need hardly draw attention to the close resemblance which this observation of Dryden's on poetic wit bears to Coleridge's observation on poetic music. Both refer back to imagination as the generating force, and both define imagination as the faculty of forming the many into one—*Einbildungskraft*.

To illustrate the independence of poetic sense is not easy, for there will always be found people to say that the verse in question is music to them, just as others will find music in a boiler-foundry or a pneumatic pick. But I should be prepared to hold that there was no real sense of musical delight in these characteristic lines of Dryden's, but that the poetic quality resided solely in their imaginative wit—a faculty to which he first gave critical definition:

> A Milk white *Hind*, immortal and unchang'd,
> Fed on the lawns and in the forest rang'd;
> Without unspotted, innocent within,
> She fear'd no danger, for she knew no sin.
> Yet had she oft been chas'd with horns and hounds
> And Scythian shafts; and many winged wounds
> Aim'd at her Heart; was often forc'd to fly,
> And doom'd to death, though fated not to dy.
>
> *The Hind and the Panther*

The word *wit* has, of course, been debased since Dryden's day, and need not be too much insisted on in this connection. What is implied is a power of manipulating ideas; we have already seen that Dryden elsewhere defines it as 'a propriety of thoughts and words; or, in other terms, thoughts and words elegantly adapted to the subject' (*The Author's Apology for Heroic Poetry*). But the power to adapt words and thoughts, that is also a definition of imagination.

The third element, suggestion, in my opinion covers all those vague notions which the Abbé Bremond has wrapped in fluffy phrases, such as 'mystery', 'enchantment,' 'intimate nature of the soul', 'magic,' and so on. The fact is that words are very inadequate means of translating thoughts; some of our thoughts are much grander and much vaguer than language can express.[1] Words are a precipitation of

[1] Cf. Maulnier, loc. cit. 'Extraordinaire destin d'un art qui use précisément du langage pour maîtriser ce qui par nature échappe au langage'.

such thoughts, but leave a parent element behind them.[1] The intelligence has an intuitive apprehension of reality, and this reality, as we apprehend it, we must strive to express as best we can—not by an emotional surrender to its very incoherence, but by an obstinate and often painful attempt *to render exactly* the emotional state which this apprehension is. To render emotion exactly—there is no need to insist on that phrase as the definition of all art what-

[1] Or we might say that all forms of expression appear against a background. This point of view has been admirably expressed by the French poet, Fernand Gregh, in an interview with M. Frédéric Lefèvre reported in *Nouvelles Littéraires*, 2 juin 1928:

'L'abbé Bremond aura résumé avec éclat un immense mouvement. Mais il nous semblait déjà, alors, que la poésie pure n'était qu'un élément de la vraie poésie et que la poésie éternelle est un mélange de ce qu'on a appelé la poésie pure et de ce qu'on pourrait, faute d'un meilleur mot, appeler la poésie humaine.

'Quand Baudelaire dit:

"Mais les bijoux perdus de l'antique Palmyre,"

il écrit un des vers les plus nostalgiques de la poésie française, un des vers de poésie pure qui à mon oreille résonne avec une puissance d'évocation égale à celle du célèbre alexandrin dont on abuse un peu et qui pourrait être d'ailleurs un vers de Gautier, "La fille de Minos et de Pasiphaë". Mais ce vers, ce beau vers:

"Mais les bijoux perdus de l'antique Palmyre,"

n'est pas gratuit et n'est pas pur, il est conditionné, il est amené par le développement d'une idée. Cette idée (juste ou fausse), et que Paul Souday taxerait de "dolorisme", mais qui est une idée, c'est que la souffrance est un divin remède à nos impuretés, que la douleur est la noblesse unique. *La poésie humaine est le substratum obligé de la poésie pure*, ou, si vous préférez, voici une autre image plus démonstrative encore: de même qu'un port de mer suppose un *hinterland*, un arrière-pays plein de prés, de bois, de fermes, d'usines, dont il draine et écoule les produits, de même la poésie pure exige tout un arrière-plan de sensations, de sentiments, d'idées même, qu'elle condense en un ou deux beaux vers infinis. La poésie pure a pour hinterland la poésie humaine'.

soever that is worthy of the name. What precisely the Abbé Bremond means by 'an incantation' which gives '*unconscious* expression' to the state of soul in which the poet exists before he expresses himself in ideas or sentiments, I do not know. I can equate 'state of soul' with intuition or instinctive apprehension—whatever the term we use, we need not deny the reality of such a state—but unconscious expression seems to me to be a contradiction in terms, and if by 'incantation' is meant merely an emotional evocation of an emotional state, then that seems to me to be a poor substitute for exact expression. Emotion is not rendered by emotion; there are events, emotions, states of soul (call them what you will) on the one side, and on the other side are certain symbols, namely, words, which in themselves are objective facts, and the process of expression, poetic or otherwise, is nothing but the translation of the one category into terms of the other.

This problem is fundamental; it is more profound than the distinction between romanticism and classicism, for after all a writer may be quite objective (and therefore classical) about his own subjective (and therefore romantic) reactions or feelings. This is no less than the problem of art or no art—of whether the writer is to control his means of expression (keep his eye on the object, as we say), or whether he is merely to abandon himself to the stream of feeling—to incantations, evocations, vague reveries, and false mysticism. In one case arduous effort, continuous self-criticism, and a definite ideal; in the other case, at the best, an inspired verbal delirium, at the worst, the actual decomposition of intelligence.

When all this has been said, and when this general distinction is borne in mind, we may then pass to a more minute examination of the function of words in poetry. I have already admitted that between the idea and the expression there may be, and often is, a gap. In the art of prose (and this is the only valuable distinction) the thought is exact and the expression is exact; there is identity. In poetry the thought is emotional (I use the phrase in full conscious-

ness of the paradox), and there is only an attempt at equivalence.[1]

No one pretends that the objective symbols of art can be identical with the emotional state they represent. A true emotion is a unique event. Art is merely a record of this event, and the criterion of art is not its capacity for arousing in us a repetition of an event that was unique and therefore cannot be repeated, or indeed its capacity for arousing emotion in any vicarious manner (for then the news of death, or any visceral disturbance of pæan or dirge, would be art), but rather the capacity for appeasing emotion,[2] the ability to create harmony where there was chaos, to extract

[1] On the distinction between poetry and prose in this paragraph, cf. Ch. Maurras, Postface to *Le Chemin de Paradis* (revised edition, 1921):

'La prose, par son accent net, me paraissait naturellement préposée à dessiner l'aspect matériel du monde autant qu'à définir les divines idées. Elle correspondait aux sublimités de l'esprit, aux poids, mesure et sollicitations de la chair. Au vers et au vers seul appartenait le privilège d'exprimer douceur ou angoisse, les arcanes du sentiment. Ce langage du cœur exigeait la musique. Par suite, une prose de pure sentimentalité me semblait trahison et indiscrétion justiciable du ridicule et de l'ironie.'

It might be objected that certain phrases in this passage approach perilously near the phrases of the Abbé Bremond to which I have taken objection, and I only make the quotation in the hope that the reader will relate it to the general intention of the author in question, which is far removed from that of the Abbé Bremond. It should be observed, too, that the distinction made by M. Maurras is only partial; it does not pretend to cover the whole range of poetry.

[2] The appeasing influence of poetry is fully recognised by the Abbé Bremond, but in his anxiety to identify the processes of poetry and prayer, he ignores the distinction between an objective and a subjective activity, between a godlike and rebellious creativity in man, and man's most utter renunciation of selfhood.

from life, which is ugly and brutal, an ideal of beauty which is abstract and absolute.

The gap between thought and expression in poetry is responsible for the mystery and magic with which the art is invested by the Abbé Bremond. The only mystery in poetry resides in the nature of the reality that poetry attempts to express. There is no mystery in the poetry itself, any more than there is mystery in an algebraic form equated with infinity. But there is at times another quality to which we might perhaps concede the term magic.[1] It is the capacity which words, and the sounds of which words are composed, have of accidentally evoking more than they literally express. In the line:

Childe Roland to the Dark Tower came

(which I propose as a parallel to 'Le prince d'Aquitaine à la tour abolie'), the wealth of suggestion is perhaps entirely due to the suggestiveness of the symbols employed: 'Childe Roland' and 'Dark Tower' are both terms charged with romantic associations. I then quote a line of Tennyson's merely to show that the effectiveness of the Greek diphthong *aë*, which it has in common with Racine's line, is not peculiar to Racine. The tremendous effect of Tennyson's line, however, is not due to its sound, but to its concentrated metaphor. More comparable to Racine's line is the first line of *Kubla Khan*. In both cases we have the effect of exotic names; the names suggest another world, another age and civilisation, of which we have a prior romantic conception. The 'magic' is created by our emotional ignorance, not by any essential poetic value in the words themselves. If for the lines in question we substituted these words:

In Elveden did Duleep Singh
A stately pleasure dome decree . . .

[1] Thierry Maulnier also plays with the word 'magic', but personally I have too much respect for the science of anthropology to use it in this context except in a merely analogical sense.

the musical value of the words is not greatly different, but the knowledge that the words express an unromantic fact is sufficient to dissipate their magic.

In Blake's famous lines the effect is again due to the metaphor, plus the vague associations of fear suggested by the word 'tyger'. Donne's lovely couplet is again a concentrated metaphor akin to Tennyson's, and its effect cannot be dissociated from the use of metaphor. The lines from *Hyperion* show an accumulation rather than a concentration of metaphors; they are not significant beyond that. But with the last three quotations we come to a different effect. The lines from Blake evoke all the beauty of twilight, yet in themselves they are a simple statement without any particular distinction of sound or metaphor ('nest' is a simile). The same observations may be made of Shelley's lyric and of Shakespeare's song—simple statements devoid of metaphor or extraordinary musical delight. In these three examples the poetical effect is one of visual imagery, of imagination intuitively selecting a few essential details of a scene, which details have the power of evoking the full reality in all its emotional significance. The words are merely means to the visual images; the poetry resides not in musical delight, but in visual delight—not the direct visual delight of plastic art, but the joy of the 'inward eye'.

If we now draw these observations together, we shall see that the individual elements of poetry (sound, sense, and suggestion) all admit of objective analysis; they can be explained without any resort to mystery or magic. But the power of originating these elements, and of combining them —the power, that is to say, of relating words to thoughts[1]—

[1] Or to emotions, if you will. But can we be conscious of an emotional state without at the same time verbalising it? It is a complex question on which the Behaviourist psychology has thrown some light. With them, I would hold that to be conscious of an emotion is to express it verbally, and therefore to make a thought of it. But not every physiological reaction is worthy of the name of an emotion. The problem, from this point of view,

this is the power of imagination. All the magic and mystery of poetry is summarised in this one word imagination, and I see no good reason for substituting for it all the mystical phraseology of the Bremond type.

At the same time it must be admitted that we have no rational explanation of the process of imagination. The definition of Aristotle, enlarged by Coleridge, is as far as we can carry the analysis of imagination. But to say that imagination is the capacity to see similarity in dissimilars, or the power of combining the many in the one—such definitions do not carry us far. They are illuminating descriptions, but they only describe the result of a process which in itself remains a mystery. Why should a particular man, the poet, have this peculiar capacity; what agency endows him with this power, and under what peculiar circumstances does this power operate? We simply do not know; we only pass from age to age repeating that adage of defeat, *Poeta nascitur, non fit*:

'The true wonder of poesy is that such contraries must meet to compose it: a genius both penetrating and solid; in expression both delicacy and force; and the frame or fabric of a true poem must have something both sublime and just, amazing and agreeable. There must be a great agitation of mind to invent, a great calm to judge and correct; there must be upon the same tree, and at the same time, both flower and fruit.'

SIR WILLIAM TEMPLE, *Of Poetry*

is to explain why one particular process of verbalisation should have a stronger affective element than another; and why a particular person (the poet) should be capable of this particular kind of verbalisation.

8

MODERN POETRY

'A warlike, various, and a tragical age is best to *write of*, but worst to *write in*.'—COWLEY.

Finally, we come to the modern phase. It might be asked, Is there a modern phase? Everything in the contemporary scene is so confused, tendencies seem so contradictory, there seem to be no fixed points to which we can relate the beginning or the end of a phase. I must admit, therefore, that there is a certain presumption in what I am going to say in this lecture, but I hope that presumption is one of historical method, not of contemporary prejudice.

The phases through which we have traced the development of English poetry might be illustrated by a series of diagrams: in the first the poet coincides with his circle; in the second he is a point within the circle; in the third he is a point on the circumference; and finally he is a point outside the circle. These are respectively the positions of the anonymous creator of ballad poetry, the humanist poet (with whom, for this purpose, we might associate the poets of love and sentiment), the religious poet, and the romantic poet. The ballad poet is identical with the world he lives in. The humanist poet is the nucleus of his world, the focus of intelligence and intellectual progress. The religious poet lives at the periphery of his world—at the point where his world is in contact with the infinite universe. The romantic poet is his own universe; the world for him is either rejected as unreal in favour of some phantom world, or is identified with the poet's own feelings. The four phases complete a cycle, beginning with the world as poet and ending with the poet as world. My presumption is that the typical modern poet is aware of the completion of this cycle, and as a consequence either despairs of his function,

or is desperately anxious to find a way out of the state of eccentricity.

It is part of my general thesis that each of these phases of English poetry can be related to a social background. It might be difficult to trace a parallel development in poetry and history, since some phases of history are without literary significance. The Industrial Revolution, for example, though it profoundly affected the economy of daily life, has no corresponding phase in literature and art. It has transformed the diffusion of literature, but the more essential changes were due to the Social Revolution which preceded, and the Scientific Movement which followed, this purely economic catastrophe. It is not, however, any part of my purpose to investigate the social foundations of literature, because I believe that in general it is a fallacious mode of approach for the literary critic. Art transcends the conditions that create it, and cannot therefore be explained by those conditions. A condition of fear, it is said, created the first religion:

Primus in orbe Deos fecit timor. . . .

But fear does not explain the nature of the gods that were created. Similarly, the rise of the novel may have been conditioned by the growth of social democracy, but no analysis in economic terms will explain the evolution of the novel as a literary form. History and criticism are separate sciences; it is possible to throw bridges from one to the other, and a good deal of enlightenment may pass across that way; but it is vain to imagine that the two systems of knowledge can be completely fused and correlated.

Nevertheless, when either history or literature fails us, then we can call in the knowledge of one as the basis of an hypothesis for the nature of the other. Our knowledge of Athenian society, for example, is to a great extent deduced from Greek literature—I do not mean in the obvious sense that Greek literature has supplied us with many of the details of Greek life, but in the general sense that the form

and type of Greek literature correspond in ways which the historian must intuitively divine with the social habits of the people. I want now to suggest that we can gain some inkling of what is significant in modern poetry by the opposite process—by asking ourselves what form and type of literature might be expected to develop from the social conditions under which we live. Having formed some hypothesis by this method, it would then be simple to look for correspondences in the poetry of to-day.

It is not easy, of course, to describe our own society. It presents very different features to the London banker, the Welsh miner, the French peasant, and the American mechanic. But the problem is simplified for us because we are only concerned with the poet's point of view. The world is a sad place for a poet at any time. He is by nature abnormally sensitive. He is a point of intensest feeling thrown out like an antenna by the social body to test the amorphous limits of existence, the nature of 'becoming'. He is the advance-guard of experience. His reward is that the social body reacts to his sensitive register and adapts itself accordingly. The poet is then the representative man, the acknowledged type of his race. But to-day (I refer particularly to English conditions) the poet makes his signals to a numb and indifferent body. He is ignored. There has surely never been a period in our literary history when poetry was so little read and the poet so little recognised. There are poets who find a fickle or ephemeral public, but they generally suffer that worst pain and ignominy of *living* to see their work neglected and finally ignored. The last poet not to be regarded by the people at large as a social anomaly was Tennyson, and that was largely for reasons that had nothing to do with poetry.

There are two possible explanations: either society has surpassed the poet, and can now dispense with him; or the poet has developed his art beyond the limits of social usefulness. Both explanations imply a failure in the poet, and both are in a measure true. Tennyson's effort to write in the

manner and with the energy of a national poet was on the whole a noble one, and is to be respected. His failure to achieve an epic tone—I would like to say an epic *tenor*—was simply that there was no epic to write within the categories of traditional poetry. Epics are never based on esoteric legend or any bookman's lore; they emerge from action, and take shape whilst the deeds they celebrate are still a lively reality to the general public. The deeds that are celebrated must at least arouse some vibration in the complex recesses of national glory and self-awareness. King Arthur and his Knights are too remote, and Milton was wiser than Tennyson in rejecting this theme.

An epic is intimately related to the aspirations of its age, and almost every age has its epic, though we do not always recognise them as such. *The Prelude* is the last English epic; it is the epic of the man of feeling. When the modern epic comes to be written it will embody the aspirations of the age, though probably in a most unexpected manner. It will be unexpected because an age never recognises its own portrait. Browning is the only nineteenth-century poet who in any way suggests an unexpected manner, though a contemporary poet has in part achieved one.

It was Browning's distinction to generalise and humanise the romantic individualism of Shelley and Wordsworth. He realised that the old poetic categories had become a store of musty and moth-eaten stage-properties. He was still a romantic, but he passed from the romantic naturalism of *Pippa Passes* to the romantic humanism of *Parleyings*. And yet it was a humanism very different from that of Chaucer and Spenser. The significant thing about Browning is that he invaded still another province in the interests of poetry; he showed that the psychological analysis of the motives underlying human conduct was full of dramatic possibilities, and because the atmosphere of such an analysis could not be conveyed by the accepted poetic diction, he invented a new poetic diction of his own. I am not sure that the originality of Browning's diction has yet been fully

recognised, but it has been studied to some effect by modern poets, and though not many of them will be found to acknowledge their debt (in literature the son is always ashamed of his parents), there is nevertheless no denying certain premonitions of modernity in such lines as these:

> Tell him—I know not wherefore the true word
> Should fade and fall unuttered to the last—
> It was the name of him I sprang to meet
> When came the knock, the summons and the end.
> 'My great heart, my strong hand are back again!'
> I would have sprung to these, beckoning across
> Murder and hell gigantic and distinct
> O' the threshold, posted to exclude me heaven:
> He is ordained to call and I to come!
> Do not the dead wear flowers when dressed for God?
> Say,—I am all in flowers from head to foot!
> Say,—not one flower of all he said and did,
> Might seem to flit unnoticed, fade unknown,
> But dropped a seed, has grown a balsam-tree
> Whereof the blossoming perfumes the place
> At this supreme of moments! . . .
>
> *The Ring and the Book*, VII

> What, then the long day dies at last? Abrupt.
> The sun that seemed, in stooping, sure to melt
> Our mountain ridge, is mastered: black the belt
> Of westward crags, his gold could not corrupt,
> Barriers again the valley, lets the flow
> Of lavish glory waste itself away
> —Whither? For new climes, fresh eyes, breaks the day!
> Night was not to be baffled. If the glow
> Were all that's gone from us! Did clouds, afloat
> So filmily but now, discard no rose,
> Sombre throughout the fleeciness that grows
> A sullen uniformity. I note
> Rather displeasure—in the overspread

Change from the swim of gold to one pale lead
Oppressive to malevolence—than late
Those amorous yearnings when the aggregate
Of cloudlets pressed that each and all might sate
Its passion and partake in relics red
Of day's bequeathment: now, a frown instead
Estranges, and affrights who needs must fare
On and on till his journey ends: but where?
Caucasus? Lost now in the night. Away
And far enough lies that Arcadia.
The human heroes tread the world's dark way
No longer. Yet I dimly see almost—
Yes, for my last adventure! 'Tis a ghost.
So drops away the beauty! There he stands
Voiceless, scarce strives with deprecating hands.

Gerard de Lairesse

Many things have happened since Browning's heyday. Though it is possible that his diction may have had some influence on modern poetry, it is quite certain that his philosophy has had none. I myself now attach more importance to Browning's philosophy than I did in the first edition of this book; compared with Tennyson's, for example, it shows a wider range of intelligence, and a mind less given to convention and prejudice. His essay on the theory of poetry is a turgid document, but that is because he did not know how to write prose. Nevertheless, his distinction between the poet as 'fashioner' (the objective poet) and the poet as 'seer' (the subjective poet) is a valid one. He surely regarded himself as a seer rather than a fashioner, and writes of the subjective poet as one who 'digs where he stands', preferring to seek absolute truth in his own soul because he regards his soul as 'the nearest reflex of that absolute mind, according to the intuitions of which he desires to perceive and speak'.

The modern poet is still a subjective poet, but he has been disillusioned. The last thing he is sure about is that his soul

is a reflex of the absolute mind. So long as he remains a poet he must believe in an absolute truth, for what is his art but an attempt at absolute truth. But he now struggles without hope, or with the knowledge that the truth as he sees it is a private reality of his own. It might interest other people, and some might even be found to believe in it. But that position would savour too much of deception for the poet; he does not want other people to believe in his ideals, because ideals have made the world a waste land; and why should his ideals be more efficacious than those of other times?

This is not a pose in the modern poet. The modern poet is before all things honest. He does not write for fame, nor for money—he would be disappointed if he did. He merely writes to vent his own spleen, his own bitterness, his own sense of the disparity between the ugliness of the world that is and the beauty of the world that might be. He is trapped in a mechanical civilisation. Everywhere about him are steel cages, and the grinning futile faces of slaves. There is no beauty in the characteristic product of the age—machinery; that is a sentimental notion. There is no beauty in anything rational—only, at the best, the harmony of numbers. Beauty emerges from the unknown, often from the inane; it may be a combination of objective facts, but it is generally an irrational, an unforeseen combination. It may inhabit the sphere of intelligence, but it controls intelligence. It is the pattern of intelligence, but not intelligence itself.

The poet is not a direct product of civilisation. It cannot be maintained that the greater the civilisation, the greater will be its poets. The Roman civilisation was greater in scope and organisation and in general culture than the Greek civilisation, but no one but a bigoted Latinist would hold that the Latin poets were superior to the Greek. But a good civilisation gives the poet opportunities; it gives him security and leisure and all the conditions necessary for a life of contemplation, and gives him these without denying him the advantages of civilisation. To-day the poet could only gain

the conditions of contemplation by renouncing civilisation—by retiring to a hermitage or a desert island. To be part of our civilisation is to be part of its ugliness and haste and economic barbarism. It is to be a butterfly on the wheel.

But a poet is born. He is born in spite of the civilisation. When, therfore, he is born into this apathetic and hostile civilisation, he will react in the only possible way. He will become the poet of his own spleen, the victim of his own frustrated sense of beauty, the prophet of despair.

These are the characteristics which we might expect of modern poetry, starting merely from an objective consideration of the conditions under which the modern poet lives. And these are, in fact, the characteristics of that type of modern poetry which seems to me to be the only *typical* modern poetry.

In formal characteristics, modern poetry is a further development of Wordsworth's theory of poetic diction, as modified and corrected by Coleridge. Wordsworth's drift was all in the direction of sincerity of expression, and if his passion for sincerity drove him to such an exaggeration as that 'there neither is nor can be any essential difference between the language of prose and metrical composition', it really only remained for Coleridge to point out that there were two kinds of sincerity, the one proceeding from impassioned meditation and possessing the rhythm and originality of creative expression, the other proceeding from rational observation, and possessing the evenness and clarity of logical and informative expression. Wordsworth was right in spirit, and his influence was fundamental and revolutionary; it is impossible to conceive the development of English poetry during the last century without Wordsworth. The implications of his theory are only now in the process of being worked out; Browning was a progress in one direction —the direction of flexibility, of making diction follow the subtleties of an unusual imaginative vision. But only within the last few years has the doctrine of sincerity in poetic diction been resumed with all Wordsworth's insistence.

Sincerity is only a word, a word of banal associations. But it is sometimes necessary to resort to such words, for in spite of their triteness, they often express profound truths which cannot very easily be conveyed in a more indirect manner. 'To thine own self be true . . .' is more than a birthday sentiment or a New Year's resolution: it is the only fundamental principle of literature and of life. In life the lack or otherwise of this guiding principle divides all kinds of impostors—above all, those who impose on themselves—from real men, men whose word is apt to be their act, and whose actions are fair, free, and consistent. In literature this maxim is a universal criterion; it governs every kind of genuine expression, from the extreme of romantic naturalism to the extreme of impersonal classicism. Equally, whether describing the state of his own soul (the confused complex of his own feelings) or the exact lineaments of an object dispassionately observed, the writer, so long as he maintains the validity of his art, holds close to the description of his own immediate mental processes, and is in no sense influenced by considerations which have nothing to do with his immediate activity. He describes as he sees, and he thinks as he feels (this is not to say, however, that he thinks *when* he feels; that would be to subordinate thought to feeling. I mean that thought, which has its own logical processes, pursues a path that always runs parallel to the process of feeling. Thought can at any moment be tested by reference to its accompanying state of sensibility. And, *vice versa*, a state of sensibility can always be tested by reference to its accompanying process of thought. Sensibility unaccompanied by thought is sentimentality).

Wordsworth's sincerity effected a revolution in English poetic diction. Modern poetry has carried that revolution a step further. Wordsworth, in his effort to reach a perfectly natural and sincere mode of expression, rejected the artificial poetic diction of the eighteenth century and attempted to equate poetic diction with the natural diction of everyday speech. In this way he rejected too much: the language of

poetry differs legitimately from the language of everyday speech, because it is the language of a heightened state of sensibility and, above all, because it is the language of a creative state of being. As we have seen, Coleridge corrected Wordsworth on this point, and the modern poet accepts Coleridge's position. But while Wordsworth rejected the artificial language of the old poetic convention, he somewhat inconsistently accepted the metrical conventions. It is true that his preference was for the simpler metrical schemes, and that he never thought of writing *The Prelude* in rhymed couplets. In a poem like *The Prelude* there is, in spite of the metre, a large amount of rhythmical composition which runs counter to the metrical scheme and is independent of it. For example:

> Ere we retired
> The cock had crowed, and now the eastern sky
> Was kindling, not unseen, from humble copse
> And open field, through which the pathway wound,
> And homeward led my steps. Magnificent
> The morning rose, in memorable pomp,
> Glorious as e'er I had beheld—in front,
> The sea lay laughing at a distance; near,
> The solid mountains shone, bright as the clouds,
> Grain-tinctured, drenched in empyrean light;
> And in the meadows and the lower grounds
> Was all the sweetness of a common dawn—
> Dews, vapours, and the melody of birds,
> And labourers going forth to till the fields.

It is perhaps no more than the old question of the scansion of blank verse, but my contention is that blank verse always tends to scan irregularly, and, generally speaking, that the more impassioned and poetic the verse becomes, the more irregular or 'free' becomes the metre.

The modern poet has no uncompromising theory of metrical composition. His theory, if any, is that it is sufficient to be a poet and to be honest with one's self, and that the

rest follows naturally. To be an extremist on the question of metre would be to repeat the mistake of Wordsworth on the question of language. The modern poet does not deny the right of regular verse to exist, or to be poetic. He merely affirms that poetry is sincerity, and has no essential alliance with regular schemes of any sort. He reserves the right to adapt his rhythm to his mood, to modulate his metre as he progresses. He may go further and maintain that this is what every great poet has done. It amuses him to see the academic scholar growing grey in the effort to explain away the irregularities of Shakespeare's blank verse. He knows that in its greatest moments there is no regularity in Shakespeare's verse, but only a tremendous sincerity, and a rhythm that is the rhythm of the emotional mood expressed, and not the rhythm of a regular scheme. Such lines as these, far from seeming inexplicable, are for him, in spite of their irregularity, the very perfection of poetic diction:

Isabella. What says my brother?
Claudio. Death is a fearful thing.
Isabella. And shamed life a hateful.
Claudio. Ay, but to die, and go we know not where;
To lie in cold obstruction, and to rot:
This sensible warm motion to become
A kneaded clod; and the delighted spirit
To bathe in fiery floods, or to reside
In thrilling regions of thick-ribbed ice;
To be imprison'd in the viewless winds,
And blown with restless violence round about
The pendent world; or to be worse than worst
Of those, that lawless and incertain thoughts
Imagine howling!—'tis too horrible!
The weariest and most loathed worldly life,
That age, ache, penury, and imprisonment
Can lay on nature, is a paradise
To what we fear of death.
Isabella. Alas, alas!

Claudio. Sweet sister, let me live:
What sin you do to save a brother's life,
Nature dispenses with the deed so far,
That it becomes a virtue.

Isabella. O, you beast!
O faithless coward! O dishonest wretch!
Wilt thou be made a man out of my vice?
Is't not a kind of incest, to take life
From thine own sister's shame? What should I think?
Heaven shield, my mother play'd my father fair!
For such a warped slip of wilderness
Ne'er issued from his blood. Take my defiance:
Die; perish! might but my bending down
Reprieve thee from thy fate, it should proceed:
I'll pray a thousand prayers for thy death,
No word to save thee.

Claudio. Nay, hear me, Isabel.

Isabella. O, fie, fie, fie!
Thy sin's not accidental, but a trade:
Mercy to thee would prove itself a bawd:
'Tis best that thou diest quickly.

Claudio. O, hear me, Isabella!

Measure for Measure, III, 1

Apart from the large number of irregular lines in this passage, there is a wild irregularity of rhythm which quite submerges the ostensible blank-verse form. With lines like these it is only necessary to compare examples of authentic modern poetry to recognise an essential similarity, which is their common sincerity:

A word then (for I will conquer it),
The word final, superior to all,
Subtle, sent up—what is it?—I listen;
Are you whispering it, and have been all the time, you sea-waves?
Is that it from your liquid rims and wet sands?

Whereto answering, the sea,
Delaying not, hurrying not,
Whisper'd me through the night, and very plainly before daybreak,
Lisped to me the low and delicious word death,
And again, death, death, death, death,
Hissing melodious, neither like the bird nor like my arous'd child's heart,
But edging near as privately for me rustling at my feet,
Creeping thence steadily up to my ears and laving me softly all over,
Death, death, death, death, death.

WALT WHITMAN

No, now I wish the sunshine would stop,
and the white shining houses, and the gay red flowers on the balconies
and the bluish mountains beyond, would be crushed out
between two valves of darkness;
the darkness falling, the darkness rising, with muffled sound
obliterating everything.
I wish that whatever props up the walls of light
would fall, and darkness would come hurling heavily down,
and it would be thick black dark for ever.
Not sleep which is grey with dreams,
nor death, which quivers with birth,
but heavy sealing darkness, silence, all immovable.

What is sleep?
It goes over me, like a shadow over a hill,
but it does not alter me, nor help me.
And death would ache still, I am sure;
it would be lambent, uneasy.
I wish it would be completely dark everywhere,
inside me, and out, heavily dark
utterly.

D. H. LAWRENCE

Eyes I dare not meet in dreams
In death's dream kingdom
There do not appear:
There, the eyes are
Sunlight on a broken column
There, is a tree swinging
And voices are
In the winds singing
More distant and more solemn
Than a fading star.

Let me be no nearer
In death's dream kingdom
Let me also wear
Such deliberate disguises
Rat's coat, crowskin, crossed staves
In a field
Behaving as the wind behaves
No nearer—
Not that final meeting
In the twilight kingdom.

T. S. ELIOT

What I have so far said about the principles of modern poetry may give the impression that it is or ought to be simple and artless in nature, the spontaneous expression of untrammelled minds. It might be so if nature and life were simple. Actually they are very complicated, and in his effort to render his feelings exactly the poet may be driven to a complicated utterance. It is a charge against much modern poetry that it is obscure. The answer to this charge is that it is not always possible to make a light out of darkness. By definition a poet is a being of abnormal sensibility, and the reactions of such a being to the complex problems of existence, both personal and universal, are sure to be of a complexity quite beyond the normal limits of expression. Where he cannot see clearly, the poet will be driven to

divine intuitively, and to express himself analogically, by means of metaphor, symbol, and allegory. It would be possible to say, were the word not so debased, that he resorted to mysticism. In modern poetry, rather accidentally, the word 'symbolism' has become associated with this mode of expression, and as a convenient label it will do as well as any other. It is more particularly associated, of course, with modern French poetry, and Stephane Mallarmé, and his disciple Paul Valéry, are typical representatives of this mode of poetic expression. We have seen in the last chapter how this school of poets has become associated with quite another question, the question of pure poetry. Valéry protested against this association; he preferred to be associated with mathematics, Leonardo da Vinci, and a portable typewriter. I suspect that his cynicism on this point hid a profounder conviction—a conviction, perhaps, that poetry has more to do with metaphysics than with abstract music. But I must not diverge into any further discussion of this quarrel, which is only remotely concerned with English poetry. I only wish to make the point that obscurity is not the same thing as ignorance, and that indeed the obligation of sincerity to one's self does not stop at the limits of rational understanding, but pursues truth with all the resources of the human intelligence.

I do not pretend that sincerity can be attained without technical skill. Far otherwise. The technical demands of modern poetry are greater than those of traditional poetry. What, for example, are the problems which face the writer of a sonnet of the conventional form? He has a verse of a definite size: fourteen lines, each line of a definite number of feet. In addition, he has a scheme of rhymes. The form must be neatly filled; there must be no padding. He must begin with an arresting line, and his concluding couplet must clinch the movement and meaning of the whole poem. It is not easy; it is not every emotion or subject that will fit perfectly into the given form. But the true poet may be supposed to recognise intuitively the appropriateness of

subject to form; and no doubt, especially in the matter of rhymes, he will find the given form inspiring him to happy elaborations of the theme.

Compare the situation of the modern poet. He rejects the sonnet and all other purely conventional forms, because he is convinced that he can give more exact expression to his subject without them; he distrusts the *arbitrariness* induced by the requisites of a fixed form. Far from seeking freedom and irresponsibility (implied by the unfortunate term *free verse*), he seeks a stricter discipline, which is the discipline of the exact concord to thought and feeling, the discipline of sincerity.

He himself knows when he has achieved this authenticity of expression, and every true appreciator of poetry knows it too. Modern poetry cannot have the superficial correctness of conventional poetry, and it is therefore more difficult to fill the conventional *rôle*. But the practice of free verse leaves room for a sufficient number of charlatans, and since they cannot be tested by a rule-of-thumb method, it is to be feared that they often enjoy an easy success with that large proportion of the readers of poetry who pay a superficial homage to the art. The appreciation of modern poetry demands a more than usual amount of attention and discrimination. You must test the modern poet as you would test your friends: by faith and familiarity and a perfect knowledge.

It would be arrogant to attempt to illustrate the insincerity of much modern poetry. I have already given specimens of the authentic kind, such as it reveals itself to my own sensibility. That should suffice. It is for each of us to follow the dictates of his own instincts and taste.

We are left with only one more question. It is this: How can the modern poet, in face of a hostile world, and with his doctrine of sincerity, find a means of reconciling his world and his art? How can he once more resume his function as the explorer and the educator of human sensibility?

It seems that there is only one ideal solution: it is that the

poet should enter again into the first phase of the historical development of poetry, and become the insidious inspirer of a fresh communal poetry. There is no possibility of assuming the *rôle* of the humanist poet, who is the germinating point or nucleus of a renaissant world: the world of the poet is no longer in a state of cultural germination. Nor can he assume the *rôle* of the religious poet; his world is no longer religious in any profound or accepted sense. Nor can he assume the *rôle* of the idealistic or transcendental poet, for to renounce the world and aspire to unity with the spirit of nature or of the universe seems to him to be the vanity of vanities. How can he with any more hope expect to resume the original *rôle* of the poet, the *rôle* of the ballad-maker?

Not, at any rate, in the obvious way. The poet who nowadays aspires to write for the masses, to write poetry with the intention that it shall be read and adopted by the people at large, will find himself in the falsest of positions. Coppée or Jammes in France, Whitman and Sandburg in America, Edward Carpenter and Rudyard Kipling in England—these are our would-be popular poets. But how much does the populace care for them? Their poems sell well, no doubt, especially in the case of Coppée, Whitman, and Kipling. But the market is middle-class or bourgeois—students, teachers, and all the half-educated and palpitating devourers of tendencious literature. The real populace—the populace that sings 'Tipperary' or 'Keep the home fires burning', or 'Roll out the barrel', or 'Lili Marlene'—this populace ignores its self-appointed bards.

The only literature that is at the same time vital and popular is the literature of the music-hall, in which, of course, I include the broadcast variety. I am not going to suggest that such literature as it at present exists is in any sense poetry. That would be a perverse and snobbish attitude. There is no poetry in 'Tipperary' and 'Keep the home fires burning'—there is only sentimentality. But it is just a possibility—and no more than a possibility—that the music-hall song and its allied forms—music-hall patter and revue

libretto—contain the germ of a new popular poetry. (It is significant that the two poets who have been most influential in our time, T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden, have both experimented with a poetry of this kind.) The danger of such a poetry is that it should be too derivative from the art which it should transcend—a criticism which I do not apply to Mr Eliot's poems, which are surely a sardonic comment on the whole situation. I do not mean, however, that the poetry I am envisaging should take the elements of something which already exists in an immature state and give them the form and polish of a preconceived culture. That is quite the wrong method. The poet must instead divine the group-feeling or emotional complex out of which the music-hall song proceeds and which the music-hall song imperfectly satisfies (imperfectly because only temporarily). He must then create a poetry which not only satisfies the immediate emotional needs of the populace, but which also possesses those universal elements of thought and feeling that ensure permanency. It will not be an easy victory for any poet: it means a surrender of every personal standpoint, and a sacrifice of all pride of knowledge and exclusiveness of sensibility. And at present our very conceptions of the poet and the poet's activity presuppose a condition of pride and of isolation. Inwardly I feel that this life of the intelligence is the only reality, and that the art of poetry is the difficult art of defining the nature of mind and emotion—a veiled activity, leading the poet deep into the obscurities of the human heart. But this is my personal attitude; more dispassionately I recognise that poetry can never again become a popular art until this research is abandoned and the poet gives himself wholly to 'the cadence of consenting feet'.

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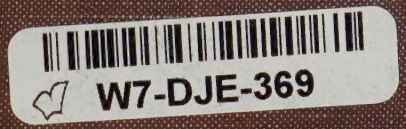
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